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### The migrant creative

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# The Migrant Creative: U.S. Media Freelancers at the Border of a Changing Work Culture

**Elaine (Laine) Goldman**

**Doctoral Dissertation**

**Tilburg University**

**Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences**

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**The Migrant Creative:  
U.S. Media Freelancers at the Border of a  
Changing Work Culture**

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# Abstract

*The Migrant Creative: U.S. Media Freelancers at the Border of a Changing Work Culture* is a collection of conversations with eleven established U.S. media freelancers across a diverse multimedia expanse. With more than one-third of U.S. workers taking on freelance by default and with growth predicted to be one-half of the population by 2020, it is critical to examine individuals who have successfully navigated this workstyle for 15 – 30 years. As one participant reveals, “Everyone is a freelancer now – they just don’t know it.”

The central question explores, “What is the lived experience of a media freelancer at the border of a changing work culture?” Social construction and appreciative Inquiry inform the theoretical framework for this research. The methodology is a mash-up of narrative research and dialogic approaches: polyphonic interviewing, autoethnography, collaborative research, performative social science, and narrative life histories.

What emerges is a compelling story that brings an appreciative gaze to the liminal lives of these project participants as they reframe the migrant creative experience – from one of a freelancer to a career improviser. These participants showcase a career dexterity that extends the parameters of freelance, moving beyond contracted assignments, to a more entrepreneurial experience by introducing their own project creation into the mix and combining a variety of workstyles – often at the same time. “*You have to be able to function as if you are on the frontier again. There’s no backup,*” suggests another participant.

The migrant creative experience is one of adaptation, improvisation, and recognizing that we are all connected. The 21<sup>st</sup> century reflects a shift from an “independent” to “interdependent” mobile reality. The new loyalty gravitates toward people not companies. This story of career sustainability is one that understands how we are relationally situated in our journey. Here the career improviser develops an appreciative focus, one that invites in the “other,” for this change has the capacity to not only jump-start creativity but also catalyze a more generative work environment. This high-level collaboration, one that welcomes change and divergent thinking, demands conversational engagement throughout the creative process. The story of these personal journeys speak of creativity as an authentic, interdependent process that breaks the age barrier and remains responsive to the dynamic face of the shifting media world. These migrant creatives are singlehandedly changing the construction of what encompasses a “real job,” and represent the face of the new work frontier.

# I. Introduction

***“Everyone is a freelancer now—They Just Don’t’ Know it.”***

***Marc Jaffe, Comedy Writer***

# Introduction

## Standing at the Crossroads of Change

*The Migrant Creative: U.S. Media Freelancers at the Border of a Changing Work Culture* is a dissertation featuring eleven distinctively creative individuals, involved with media making, who have been traversing a freelance career path for 15+ years. The rest of the workforce is now catching up to the media worker who has had a longer history than most collaborating and co-creating on a per-project basis (e.g. film production, advertising, etc.).

Before the dot-com bubble burst (2000), September 11<sup>th</sup> (2001), Facebook (2003), Twitter (2006), crowdsourcing (<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html>), the subprime meltdown (late 2000s), and the global recession (late 2000s) -- media freelancers were compensated both financially and creatively for producing content. The remuneration has been radically altered in the last decade as more freelancers flood the market and media consumers now have the capacity to also be media producers because of technological efficiencies (Deuze, 2007). As Thomas Friedman notes in *The New York Times* interview discussing globalization, "As a result, we're now entering what I think is a fundamental paradigm shift. A truly disruptive, Gutenberg-printing-press-like paradigm shift, and nobody's told the kids" (Pearlman & Briody, 2005 March 25).

Media makers already know the precariousness of compressed budgets, time constraints, and slow payments. As a consequence, freelancers are mustering their own creative skills for reinventing work; which includes many permutations such as continuing freelance, developing a business or philanthropic organization, becoming more entrepreneurial, embracing co-working, negotiating a full or part time position, adapting by downsizing, switching locations, retiring or a mashing up of the aforementioned. Since many were never really entrenched in corporate hierarchies, they have been surprisingly improvisational building lateral relationships across many different domains and in many ways this is what is required in the new workforce. Media freelancers were early pioneers in a lifestyle that has now been appropriated by a significant number of workers worldwide. Freelance is not standalone any more than full-time work is at this point in time. Our concept of what is a "real job," a social construction, has been irrevocably altered and expanded to include many work style configurations. This social construct is explored in *This is a Real Job*.

According to the Freelancers Union (<http://www.freelancersunion.org/>), a free virtual platform for independent workers launched in 2001, 42 million U.S. workers are now situated as freelancers or contract workers. The Freelancers Union is bringing critical issues to the forefront that impacts the "independent" worker. Although the Freelancers Union uses the term "independent," the term "interdependent" is more apropos for media workers given that they work collaboratively with clients, are relationally networked, and often serve

as part of a creative team. Regardless, the Freelancers Union is bringing to light core concerns such as taxes and delinquent payments along with revamping health insurance, which have been traditionally tied to full-time employment.

Stacey Vanek Smith reveals how “*More Americans Shift to Contract Work*” on American Public Radio *Marketplace*. This segment discusses the far-ranging implications for an American workforce where a third of the citizens in the U.S. now have to assume the burden for healthcare, unemployment, disability, and retirement. Andrew Ross, a work and culture expert at New York University, already sees this impacting his students and notes, “They’re terrified quite frankly. . .and more and more students are doing double majors or cramming in as many minors as they can to equip themselves with as many skills as they can amass” (Smith, 2011 September 7). The onus of responsibility is swiftly moving from the corporation to the individual while governmental structures and support systems lag way behind. A population of educated citizens with skills and ambition, who pay the taxes that have funded bailouts and stimulation packages, now wonder where is their bailout as they cobble together a living? Click the following link to hear *Marketplace* segment (<http://www.marketplace.org/topics/business/more-americans-shift-contract-work>).

The media workers participating in this project demonstrate the improvisational skills, discipline, and brainpower needed to stay current, agile and connected in the rapidly shifting creative industries. They also have the self-care knowledge to balance and recalibrate from the intensity of a deadline-driven business, which requires significant energy and even more so during the recent economic downturn because of increased hours and decreased wages.

*The Migrant Creative: U.S. Media Freelancers at the Border of a Changing Work Culture* examines the ever-changing lives of media freelancers. There are limited work histories of freelance media workers, especially those with portfolios and careers spanning multiple disciplines and decades that candidly, publicly reveal their story. This dissertation is an attempt to fill that gap.

## The Importance of This Topic

*The Migrant Creative: U.S. Media Freelancers at the Border of a Changing Work Culture* is a story about creative individuals traversing the new work frontier. Freelancers, rather than being marginalized, are now being institutionalized within the business structure. As the job market morphs into a new model free of perks, offices, insurance or the promise of a steady paycheck – it is important to study how freelancers are navigating this shifting workforce culture and many for decades.

The film, television, music, video gaming, advertising and Internet-driven industries regularly employ contract workers and this phenomenon is growing across all business sectors. Professionals with varying skills come together for relatively short periods of time, contribute to a project, and then leave. Some production and creative teams retain the same loose-knit network for years.

These eleven project participants, intersecting with many multimedia domains (see *Appreciative Reflections*), teach us invaluable commonsense strategies about organizational teamwork – and who works? The project participants' individual conversations create a composite image of life as a migrant creative and these lessons are pertinent for all consultants.

After an extensive search for ethnographies or biographical work narratives examining the lifestyle of media freelancers, I found limited in-depth personal stories or work histories of everyday folks working in the industry. What emerged were excellent academic summations of the media industry at specific points in time and descriptions of the precariousness of freelance work, however the people were nameless, faceless and lacked an extended U.S. work history (see *Methodology*).

### **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Workforce: Moving Toward Greater Improvisation and Collaboration; Shifting From Independent to Interdependent**

The terms “real job” and “independent” worker are already being redefined at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to reflect an “interdependent” reality that incorporates a more mobile, transient workforce and the freelancer is on the frontline of this change. The nature of competition in the workforce is still about hiring the “best and brightest” but evolving to incorporate project-oriented collaborative teams that not only bring out the best in each other but are also able to internally challenge an organization to examine what is working and then build on those capacities to create something new. This positive spiral of capacity building reaching from the individual to the organization and then dynamically entwining them together is the new model for best practices in working relationships. As noted in a “*Sustainable Innovation*” article, “Future business schools will look more like design schools – alive with design studios, interdisciplinary teams, and rapid prototyping – where managers act as designers who recognize disruptive, unexpected innovation opportunities” (Cooperrider, 2008).

The new nimble worker, often personified by the freelancer, is someone that has been a frontrunner working in the creative interdisciplinary model. The freelancer has the capacity to enter an organization and get up to speed quickly, decipher what is working, improvise with the resources at hand, and to communicate with dialogic processes that are respectful of partnership while allowing for “soloing and supporting” (Barrett, 2012) roles.

This “migrant creative” study is vital given that “70 million people will not be in a job (up from around 40 million today) by 2020. Going freelance will be the dominant experience,” according to an article in *Forbes* which examines a workforce where close to one-half of all Americans by 2020 will be self-employed or working on professional freelance teams with varying levels of expertise and education. Shaughnessy stresses that the new employer and employee ecosystem, built on strong group loyalty, is comprised of freelance teams ready to “step into an expansion opportunity and fill it out quickly” and contributes to “the reason why the big consulting companies will double in size by 2020” (Shaughnessy, 2012 February, 26).

Although the word “independent” inevitably becomes attached to the freelancer, the focus of this dissertation is to change the association to “interdependent” as a reminder of our

ongoing relational collaboration evident from the negotiation phase to the completion of a project. As per-project work teams are now becoming more commonplace, it is essential to study freelancers who have a long history of improvisation and collaboration.

Given the pro-youth focus in the media industry, it is unusual to find participants whose work history spans decades – and this study is critical given that workers are staying in the workforce longer and will continue to work on intergenerational creative teams in the future. “Collaboration across generational lines is an improvisational activity” (Bava, personal communication, 2012). See chapter “*The Generative Years: Living What’s Next.*”

## **Media Workers Get To Tell Their Own Story**

Media workers often get to tell other peoples’ stories but rarely their own. For my dissertation, I wanted to paint a picture of working in a migratory industry. I was inspired by the compelling real life storytelling of Studs Terkel, author of *Working* (1974), and *Nickel and Dimed* writer Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) who fearlessly served up poignant narratives of working in America. I was also intrigued with the idea of reflections after reading media theorist Holland Wilde’s *Cultural Farming* website that invites us to “retell media’s unreflexive stories back to their makers and challenge their anonymous cultural production” (<http://www.culturalfarming.com/home/main.html>).

There is limited literature revealing work biographies of media freelancers who have been in the business for decades. The stories we read are generally about young techno-savvy creative individuals making their mark as branders and developers of popular culture. Surprisingly, there are few stories about seasoned creative individuals’ experiences of aging and working relationships in a youth-focused culture in the U.S. I explore these stories in the chapter “*The Generative Years: Living What’s Next.*”

## **The Dissertation: A Collaborative Process**

### **The Participants**

The migrant creative story is one of early adoption and adaptation of the freelance work style. It is a story of media freelancers, many with 15 to 30+ years, who are improvising and reinventing their lives both personally and professionally in the industry.

The eleven dissertation participants, ranging from a Guggenheim recipient to Emmy winners, are the drivers of inventive projects across diverse disciplines including documentary work, experimental film, the recording industry, journalism, the Internet, advertising, reality television, game shows, screenwriting, radio, and comedy. As Marc Jaffe, a project participant and former *Seinfeld* writer notes, “*Everyone is a freelancer now – they just don’t know it.*” It is in this changing work context, that I invited eleven colleagues to discuss the shifting landscape of their freelance media work at the crossroads of technological change.

The dissertation participants include: **jimi izrael**, a moderator on NPR’s *The Barbershop* and author of *The Denzel Principle: Why Black Women Can’t Find Good Black Men* (2010); **Kasumi**, a 2011 Guggenheim recipient, now working on a feature-length experimental



narrative entitled *Shockwaves*; **Carol E. Beck**, an international video producer for name-brand corporate accounts like Mercedes Benz, The Coca-Cola Company, IBM, Panasonic, etc., while also following her passion for Buddhism by documenting monastic projects for the Emory-Tibet Partnership in India; **Marc Jaffe**, a comedian and writer, is now incorporating both of these skills in his foundation, *Shaking With Laughter*, which is raising money for Parkinson's disease research; **Alan McElroy** a screenwriter, whose latest screenplay is scheduled to be produced by *X-Men's* Ralph Winter and directed by Akiva Goldsman (*A Beautiful Mind* and *Cinderella Man*); **Steven Tatar**, entrepreneur currently rebranding Ohio Knitting Mills, Internet designer and former creative head of American Greetings; **Kate Farrell** reality television executive producer with WE-tv; **Ayad Rahim**, former *New York Times* Blogger and radio show host with a focus on the Middle East, currently in graduate school; **Sheryl White** a copywriter for major national accounts; **Laura Paglin**; filmmaker and documentarian; and **Bill Cavanaugh**, audio engineer MTV, VHI, History Channel, Nova, Discovery, etc.

## **The Conversations**

Since media is a relationally networked business, I connected with people that I have worked with in the past or had familiarity with their projects. I visited with all the project participants and had in-depth relaxed conversations in the summer of 2010. We had some time to reconnect beforehand so the atmosphere was casual, comfortable, and collegial. I invited them into a conversation with some common overlapping questions. Our discussions meandered but often touched on professional issues that pervade their personal lives such as aging in a youth-fixated industry; how the nature of the industry has changed over the years; the influence of technology; the challenges and rewards of working as a freelancer; future plans and whether the work was sustainable; and lessons they could offer to someone in order to successfully navigate the industry.

## **Sense Making: The Appreciative Reflection**

For each of the participants, the time of the interview (2010) coincided with a severe economic recession. It was easy to be cynical about work and working. All the participants had a long career with plenty of highs and lows. Instead of focusing on a "deficit discourse" (Gergen, 1994), the *Appreciative Reflection* was a positive profile with conversational takeaways that offered valuable insight on how to navigate the freelance life. The *Appreciative Reflection* was inspired by my deep interest in Appreciative Inquiry -- a methodology pioneered by organizational behavior expert David Cooperrider -- where the conversation shifts to what is positive and working in an organization as opposed to a problem-solution discourse. This repositioning has the capacity to generate change as described in the *Social Construction: A Reader*:

The practice of appreciative inquiry is lodged in the assumption that when we begin to explore people's positive experiences in an organization, the conversations begin to change. And when we use these stories of value to create visions of a desired future, powerful forces of change are unleashed. (Gergen and Gergen, 2009, p. 160)

I adapted the appreciative focus to create the first level of sense making: the conversations and their transcriptions being the first steps toward making meaning; while utilizing the creative application of the appreciative focus to read and write about our conversation, I designed the appreciative reflections for each freelancer. This process allowed for an

appreciative construction of important lessons learned without getting mired in the economic slump; then it was possible to move forward and weave the common threads across their narratives that spans the breadth of a substantial media freelance career.

The assumption that AI fixates on positivity at the expense of reality is a countering viewpoint sometimes expressed. In my case, I did not gloss over the participants' concerns about their career challenges; those excerpts were woven into all of the chapters. As noted in *Appreciative Living: The Principles of Appreciative Inquiry in Personal Life*, "It often requires a shift to notice and appreciate the inherent learning that is always present (Kelm, 2005, p.40). The Appreciative focus served as a wide-angle lens that allowed for an extraction of lessons learned throughout a long career spanning decades. It is not about boarding the "Good Ship Lollipop" of positivity, but being able to find "the best of what is present in each moment, person, and experience. It is not what we wish were there, but the good we can actually find" (Kelm, 2005, p. 40).

## The Migrant Creative Is A Personal Story

As a media freelancer for many years prior to academia, I often affectionately referred to myself as "migrant creative" because of the nomadic nature of entering so many diverse work cultures in order to convey a client's story through multimedia. Although I enjoyed the work and people I met along the way, I decided that as a single parent with a young child that a "regular job" along with a predictable paycheck would make my life less precarious and I headed into full-time academic career after teaching adjunct for years.

The irony of course was that here I was preparing students for jobs that did not exist and ultimately knew that they would be creating their own if they were to succeed in this transient industry. This is something that schools do not necessarily want to convey; that it is easier to teach and learn the skills than it is to secure the work. The reality is that students should be prepared to enter many work style configurations including freelance and full-time work – and possibly even at the same time.

Now I am in academia, where the price of admission is a doctorate, and while teaching I was working on my dissertation. It almost felt like a privileged position until I had to go up for tenure and promotion a few months shy of completing my dissertation. With the economy at loose ends, I did not receive an extension and had a reprieve of one year to complete my PhD, teach four classes a semester, and job hunt. In a coincidental way, this perhaps allowed me to identify more with the plate-spinning skills required of a freelancer where they are looking for the next gig while working. However, freelancers do not have the critical backup of unemployment or advance notice of when a job is going to end.

I discovered that when writing the multiple stories of these talented and adaptive workers, they gave me hope that not only would I survive – but thrive. No, their lives were not perfect because of the economic downturn but they were doing better than most people and their careers were interesting. Their work histories conveyed a story of struggle but also demonstrated amazing inventiveness, adaptation in spite of decreased wages and increased time constraints. I was impressed with all the participants' improvisational skills.

## Reading The Migrant Creative

This dissertation, *The Migrant Creative: U.S. Media Freelancers at the Border of a Changing Work Culture* is a behind-the-scenes story examining the lifestyle of freelancers who often toil anonymously as “cultural farmers” (Holland Wilde), sometimes without ownership rights, entering and moving across diverse cultural or geographic domains and hence the term “migrant creative.” The freelancers, with an untethered work style, live off the media landscape grid and move to the next watering hole. You can read about their journeys and their landscape by reading the Micro Narratives and the Macro Narratives respectively.

### Micro Narrative: The Appreciative Reflection

The Micro Narratives are interactive personal reflections for each of the participants. Through the appreciative gaze, I reveal career highpoints and critical life lessons learned on their freelance path. It is best to read the interactive, micro narratives or “Appreciative Reflections” before the macro narrative chapters in order to acquaint yourself with the individual voices. The voices of the project participants are italicized for readability.

### Macro Narrative: The Chapters

The four chapters that constitute the macro narratives, blending many voices and perspectives, collectively explore freelance issues surrounding working in the media industry.

*“The Liminal Freelance Landscape: Geography, Proximity, and Community”* examines not only the notion of liminality which is the in-between tensional state of “not knowing” when, where, how, and with whom the work will materialize; but also recognizing how geography, proximity, and community clearly impact freelance work.

In the chapter *“This is a Real Job,”* the changing and expanding social construction of the term a “real job” is explored along with the “social ghosts” (Gergen, Schrader & Gergen, 2009) that inspire or haunt freelancers on their work journey. Here the participants share stories of personal challenge, adaptation and reward with their freelance lifestyle. *“A Conversation About Negotiation and Sustainability”* introduces the notion of negotiation as an ongoing, continuous conversation throughout the lifecycle of a project. The chapter, *“The Generative Years: Living What’s Next,”* reflects on creativity and aging while working in a youth-fixated industry.

You are invited to explore and share the multi-voiced reflections of these freelance media sojourners in *The Migrant Creative: U.S. Media Freelancers at the Border of a Changing Work Culture*.

## II. Literature Review

***“A college education is supposed to guarantee you a job. That’s the Cosby generation model. I tell my son that a college education doesn’t guarantee a job – but it gives you more choices and I think that’s what we need to start teaching students. But at least you would have more choices between Wendy’s and McDonalds or between Starbucks and Caribou where you can work. Now a college education in theory will give you some variables on what you can do with your life. But you’re better off with one than without.”***

***“I would tell them to go work at Starbucks. I’m just lucky. I just happen to know what I’m doing. I wouldn’t try to make a living freelancing. I wouldn’t encourage anybody to make a living freelancing. I’d tell them to get a job at Starbucks. Write at night. Write first thing in the morning. Make tea or a small mocha the rest of the day. . . There’s some PhD’s working there right now that are really happy.”***

***Jimi izrael, Culture Critic and Journalist***

# Literature Review

## Viewing Life Through A Social Constructionist Lens

The website mission statement for the Taos and Tilburg Ph.D. program, with the following orienting principles and relational “thoughts” from Kenneth J. Gergen, resonated with my values. One such idea addresses the power of relationships to literally construct our world, “Constructionist theory and practice locates the source of meaning, value and action in the relational connection among people. It is through relational processes that we create the world in which we most want to live and work” (<http://www.taosinstitute.net/theoretical-background>). Although social construction encompasses a broad range of ways we locate value and meaning within a social context, I found the relational lens to be the primary focus that worked best with this project. Here I positioned myself to reveal not only our interdependent connectedness, but also extended my parameters to include the importance of how our conversations create meaning and make a difference. These relational or social constructionist threads were woven throughout the entire dissertation along with the inclusion of many participant perspectives to showcase how we have the capacity to entertain multiple “truths.”

## We Make Meaning Through Our Relational Connections

As “relational beings,” we create meaning from our every day encounters and conversations (Gergen, 2009; Burr, 1995). We are socially constructed as we intersect with different cultures, meet neighbors embodying different beliefs and practices, and sample new experiences that shape and change our attitudes and ideas. What we accept as reality is very fluid as we bump against new people and even fictitious characters from television shows, plays, or books as they manage to infiltrate our lives and change attitudes. Popular television shows from *Modern Family* to *The New Normal* represent a shift in thinking about what constitutes being a “regular” family. The socially constructed reconfiguration of what is a “regular job” is also happening on the work front and this is explored in the chapter “*This Is A Real Job.*”

This meaning making of how our relational connections make a difference is woven into the dissertation process. The utilization of autoethnography in the appreciative reflections, where my relationship with the participants is situated in the story, chronicles “self in relation to others” (Ellingson & Elis, 2008, 454). In my case, “Doing autoethnography affects individuals who do the work of ‘re-storying’ their lives; the autoethnographic story becomes part of the life, an element of the ongoing construction of self” (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 455). After writing the appreciative reflections, I not only better understood my own relationship with all the participants but it also informs my past position with freelance work while also resituating and expanding my present attitude toward work in the future. This full circle re-storying also enables the participants to see themselves differently and

contributes to their own sense making of what they do for a living. As relational beings, we are in an endless loop of meaning-making together.

### **Conversations Are The Language of Relationships; The Centerpiece of Meaning Making and Collaboration**

The story we tell about work or life, whether based in fact or fiction, involves our relational connection with others and is carried through conversations. In a book entitled *Bakhtin and His World* dialogue is described with three schematic elements, “a dialogue is composed of an utterance, a reply, and a relationship between the two. It is the relation that is most important of the three, for without it the other two would have no meaning” (Holquist, 1990, p. 38). According to Harlene Anderson, “In dialogue, participants jointly examine, question, wonder, and reflect on the issues at hand. Through these two-way exchanges, participants try to understand each other and the uniqueness of the other’s language and meaning *from the other’s perspective not theirs*” (Anderson, 2012, p. 10-11). How we make meaning and understand the world is born of dialogue; and relational conversations are the centerpiece of meaning making.

### **The Stance of “Not Knowing” Activates Curiosity, Opens Dialogue, and Creates Space for Multiple Realities**

Whether in the world of therapy or trying to understand another person’s point of view, it is important to take a stance of curiosity and not-knowing where we “acknowledge the limitations of any position or opinion, professional and personal, knowing that any single view of reality is one of many and has been constructed within the relationships and institutions with (in) which one, historically and currently, interacts” (Gehart, Tarragona & Bava, 2007, p. 375). With a social constructionist stance, assumptions about the “other” or the need to be “right” are left behind and this allows for a more liberating dialogic practice built on discovery and meeting people where they are and moving forward together. Listening is therefore not a passive act but one that enables us to create a space for dialogue rather than debate. It is also in this listening mode that we can make “space for multiple local realities” (Hosking, 2008, p. 683). As Hosking reveals, “In general terms polyphony may be constructed in nonhierarchical ways that recognize and support difference and that construct *power to* rather than what I earlier called “*power over*” (Hosking, 2008, p. 683). Listening is a critical way of engaging dialogue that gives *power to* multiple voices and inherently entertains the idea of a multiplicity of realities and responses.

### **Positive Dialogic Engagement Jumpstarts Creativity and Collaboration**

Whether you are a media freelancer or in another profession, you meet clients through everyday interactions and conversational exchanges. Media freelancers need positive dialogic engagement (Anderson & Gehart, 2007; McNamee, 2005) for not only securing the work but also for having conversations with clients that invite them to share their stories while imagining a better future together rather than getting trapped in a negative dialogic spin cycle. This often requires offering an appreciative focus (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) – a dialogic practice that examines what is working in a situation rather than engaging in a “deficit discourse “ which focuses on what isn’t working and “bleeds life from the

organization” (Gergen, 1994). These nuanced conversations provide a framework for effective team building (Gergen, Schrader & Gergen, 2009, Gergen, 2009) and invite in new ideas and innovation required for the new entrepreneurial economy (Barrett, 1998, 2012; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Our interdependent world requires collaboration, invention, and improvisation if we intend to co-create sustainable communities and foster global connectivity. The confluence of social construction, collaboration, improvisation, and dialogic practices as it relates to the lives of media freelancers is further examined in the *Methodology* chapter and throughout the dissertation.

## **Reality is a Choice of Ever-Changing Channels and Inherently Collaborative**

The second part of the statement previously introduced in “*Viewing Life Through a Social Constructionist Lens*” is very powerful – “that we create the world in which we most want to live and work” (<http://www.taosinstitute.net/theoretical-background>). So reality is not a set place but a choice of where we want to focus our energy? A social constructionist framework acknowledges that the world shapes us and we in turn create the reality we live in. This is not about being causally, individually “acted upon” but a more definitive partnership approach to “acting with” as a shift to a more powerful collaborative stance. “The vision of relational being will invite us, then, to set aside the freedom/determinism opposition, and to consider the world in terms of relational confluence” (Gergen, 2009, xvi).

There are infinite ways to interpret, value, and understand the world around us (Anderson & Gehart, 2007, p. 9). The idea of where we focus our attention is critical to how we perceive the world. We have all had the experience of family members, living within the same household, having radically different views of their upbringing even with the same parents and similar circumstances. This happens because engagement is not causal but one of connective possibilities. Our reality – a place where meaning, thoughts, knowledge and truth comingle – is continuously being reviewed, changed, and challenged as we move through life with others. Reality offers infinite programming possibilities and our choices are only limited by our attention span, the ability to take in a multiplicity of ideas, or whether we feel a need to censor conflicting attitudes. What social construction does offer is the knowledge that it is through our relationships that transformative dialogue is possible:

*Perhaps the key feature of conversational partnership is the capacity of individuals to value the other's participation in a conversation. When we think of meaning as originating in the minds of single individuals, we are often 'fault finding.' What if their ideas trample on mine?' or 'What if their plan is better than mine?' we might ask. When we realize that meaning is co-constructed, that it requires more than one to 'make' an idea, then a premium is placed on mutual valuing as opposed to ego-centric competition. (Anderson et al, 2008, p. 26)*

As Dian Marie Hosking notes, “The view that relational processes construct realities has major implications for all inquiry and change work” and allows us to make a leap that not only recognizes multiple voices but also invites this polyvocal engagement into the change process. “The shift to appreciation is a way of recognizing that we are always already in the middle of relational realities and therefore without secure grounds either for claiming self as superior (e.g., more knowing) or for critique of Other” (Hosking, 2008, p. 683).

We are a socially constructed work-in-progress with an extensive multi-layered history and relational web that is always evolving and pushing up against different disciplines, ideas and boundaries, entering new fields, while changing our self and others on the journey. As giant amoeba-like, relationally fed shape shifters – our relational history shapes us and in turn we shape history.

## **The Truth On Truth: The Takeaway**

With social construction, there is no one size fits all singular overarching "objective truth" but a "commonsense reality" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), which we have tacitly agreed to accept as real and true. It reminds me of documentary filmmaking where I often mention to students, "remember a documentary is not the truth, it is somebody's version of their truth." Truth, like history, has many plausible versions of the same story. That is why the use of multiple voices and stories was critical to this dissertation. The audience is free to form their own conclusion from a vast collection of material presented and it is understandable that everyone will walk away with a different take on the situation. For me, this is a refreshing departure from a more traditional academic environment where we clutch our beliefs tightly and are told that 'right' thinking demands ironclad conclusions. As in film, tight conclusions are constructed to work better in fiction rather than in real life.

## **The Media, Technology, and Culture Review**

When I started this dissertation three years ago (2009), the job market was in the process of losing steam while the economy headed into a deep recession. The freelance market on all fronts was heating up and this critical shift continues today. This upsurge in the number of freelancers or contractors emerging in the workforce is a phenomenon occurring not only in media, but also throughout the entire workforce. Andrew Ross, a NYU work and cultural expert, attributes this migratory status to "Quality of Life" programs introduced in the 1970 to stimulate a jaded workforce and "make work more feel good and meaningful also marked the onset of long decline in job security" and explains:

As the workplace became more inclusive, free or self-actualizing for employees, it became less just and equal in its provisions or guarantees. This was as true for production workers, reorganized into teams exercising a degree of decision-making around their modules, as for white-collar employees, encouraged to be self-directing in their work applications. In either case, the managerial program to sell liberation from drudgery was accompanied by the introduction of risk, uncertainty and nonstandard work arrangement. As far as corporate conduct went, it is fair to say that one hand gave while the other took. (Ross, 2008, p. 35)

Author Thomas Friedman in, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (Friedman, 2005), examines how technology has upended a vertical hierarchy to one that is "side-by-side" and where "uploading" has significantly, permanently altered the way we collaborate is also contributing to a highly mobile workforce and all of this in less than a decade.



Our jobs are often no longer in our community or even country as evidenced by call centers and intriguing new businesses offered through outsourcing here and abroad. The perspective offered by Friedman demonstrates how significant technological inventions at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have irrevocably allowed us to be more transient and mobile (e.g. smart phones, laptops, etc.) and our digital footprint is far more revealing than a standard resume in showcasing our reputation – now even more critical in a connected world.

Jody Greenstone Miller, founder and CEO of the Business Talent Group, in a *Wall Street Journal* online opinion piece poignantly reveals, “The surge in temp hiring is not a sign of a malfunctioning economy. It is the face of the future.” Greenstone Miller also recognizes the positive capacity for repositioning our view of how we work:

As we reboot the great American job machine, it’s time to shelve outdated assumptions and accept that a portfolio of multiple assignments is what growing legions of companies and executives want. This new relationship between talent and firms isn’t a failure to be stigmatized, but the latest sign of our economy’s endless capacity for renewal and innovation. (Miller, 2009, November 30)

Greenstone Miller, also a former special assistant to Bill Clinton, had the prescient capacity to see how collaborative, creative work teams coming together for very specialized projects is where the new work is heading.

## **From Accidental Entrepreneur to Conscious Freelancer**

The story is about moving from being an accidental entrepreneur as described by Robert Reich in a *New York Times* article “*Entrepreneur or Unemployed*” where he suggests that many people were forced into so-called “self-employment” because “layoffs by midsized and large companies have surged while hiring has almost disappeared” (Reich, 2010). We are now developing a new emerging freelance consciousness as evidenced by the steadily growing online Freelancers Union (<http://www.freelancersunion.org/>). Sara Horowitz founder of the online Freelancers Union examining “*Why Our Employment Figures Are Wrong*” suggests that “a full one-third of the U.S. workforce at last count (which was 6 years ago), aren’t counted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in a consistent and ongoing way” (Horowitz, 2011, June 26).

There is no doubt that “take your child to work day” may be happening right at home or at a coworking office coming soon to your neighborhood. At the moment, coworking is gaining momentum and this is evidenced with a Global Coworking Unconference Conference, which will be happening in Austin, Texas in March 2013 (<http://www.austingcuc.com/2013/>). There is a growing population recognizing the potential for a large interdependent work population where shared office space and cross-fertilization can happen to counteract creative isolation. The developing of coworking enterprises throughout the country demonstrates a new conscience emerging that is taking hold of the imagination for envisioning new career possibilities.

How we landed here was certainly not accidental and futurists such as Alvin Toffer, author of *Future Shock* (1971), *The Third Wave* (1984) and *Powershift: Knowledge, Wealth, and*

*Violence at the Edge of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (1991) predicted many of the dramatic changes as a culture moves from the industrial to information age. Jeremy Rifkin, in his groundbreaking bestseller, updated for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* (Rifkin, 1995, 2004) views the decline in jobs as a justice issue if the human race is to have a viable future:

While the emerging 'knowledge sector' and new markets abroad will create some new jobs, they will be too few to absorb the vast numbers of workers displaced by the new technologies. Every nation will have to grapple with the question of what to do with the millions of people whose labor is needed increasingly less, or not at all, in an ever more automated global economy. Rethinking the very nature of work is likely to be the single most pressing concern facing society in the decades to come. Rifkin warns that the end of work could mean the demise of civilization as we have come to know it, or signal the beginning of great social transformation and the rebirth of human spirit. (Rifkin, back cover, 2004)

In the debate about how best to divide up the benefits of productivity advances, every country must ultimately grapple with an elementary question of economic justice. Put simply, does every member of society, even the poorest among us, have a right to participate in and benefit from increases in productivity brought on by the information and technology revolutions? (Rifkin, 2004, p. 267)

What Rifkin does envision is eventually transitioning to a community-centered, service-oriented third sector with a social conscience for constructive rebuilding of community in order to fill the void left in the public and private sectors (p. 239):

The diminishing role of both the mass worker and central government in the affairs of the marketplace is going to force a fundamental rethinking of the social contract. Recall that for most of the industrial era, market relationships took precedence over traditional relationships, and human worth was measured almost exclusively in commercial terms. Now that 'selling one's time' is diminishing in value, the entire labyrinth of commercial relationships that it is built upon that arrangement is likewise threatened. Similarly, now that the role of central government as a guarantor of markets is diminishing in importance, governing institution adrift and will need to redefine their mission if they are to remain relevant to the lives of their citizens. (Rifkin, 2004, p. 238)

To learn more about Jeremy Rifkin's Foundation for Economic Trends click on the following link: (<http://www.foet.org/>).

## **The Changing Marketplace**

There are many Americans who are working from home by choice. Matt Bai, who covers politics for the *New York Times* magazine talks with NPR host Anthony Brooks about "the new American workers – untethered and unplugged" in a segment "*Why More Americans Are Choosing To Work From Home.*" Bai suggests that the government has not caught up to the new workforce situated at home. Horowitz executive director of the freelancers union notes, "there's a frustration because this is a third of the workforce – 10 percent are

independent contractors and self-employed -- And they have to pay out of their own pocket for health, retirement. They have to craft their own unemployment system” (NPR, 2007, November 13). Anthony Brooks asks a significant question, “is it time to rewrite the social contract?” Click on the following link to listen to this NPR segment (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16258233>).

The incongruity is that many of the communication and media textbooks are slowly waking up to the reality that the dominant work theme in media that is emerging is freelance. After examining the best-selling textbook utilized for my basic introduction to media course, there was only one indexed reference for freelance (Vivian, 2009, 2010). There were profiles of famous media makers but I wanted more realistic portraits of everyday media makers.

Stacey Vanek Smith in a Marketplace segment (September 7, 2011) discusses freelance with Sara Horowitz of the Freelancers Union and Andrew Ross, a work and culture expert at N.Y.U. The informed professors are realistic about the advantages, reward, and risks in media and as Ross notes when it comes to students, “They’re terrified, quite Frankly. More and more students are doing double majors or cramming in as many minors as they can to equip themselves with as many skills as they can amass.” As stated, “More Americans are tripping into the world of contract work and out of the traditional workplace. Some 42 million are freelancing, juggling part-time assignments and going from gig to gig” as revealed on the following Marketplace website link (<http://www.marketplace.org/topics/business/more-americans-shift-contract-work>).

The following experts, traversing many disciplines from media to urban planning, are paving the way for a more coherent vision and understanding of precarious media work at the crossroads of rapidly changing labor, culture, and technology: Deuze (2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011); Deuze, Elefante & Steward (2010); Paterson (2001); Neff (2001, 2005); Neff, Wissinger & Zukin (2005); Christopherson (2004, 2008); Christopherson & van Jaarsveld (2005); Christopherson, Garretsen & Martin (2008); Townley, Beech & McKinlay (2009); Markusen, Wassall, DeNatale & Cohen (2008); Daniel Pink (2002); Andrew Ross (2008); Jacoby (1998); Terry Flew (2011, Deuze); Holland Wilde; Rosalind Gill (2002, 2011 Deuze) Chris Bilton (2011, Deuze et al.); Gordon & de Souza e Silva, (2011); Platman, (2004); Story, Salaman & Platman (2005); Zukin, (1998); Florida (2004, 2005, 2008); and Horowitz of the Freelancers Union.

## **The Precarious Media Worker**

The irony is that for the average media worker the decreased wages coupled with tight budgets and compressed deadlines makes making a living more difficult; while cities are embracing creative folks as strategies for recovery and to lure filmmakers (Christopherson & Richtor, 2010; Christopherson, 2002; Florida, 2008; 2009). Many freelancers, including those involved with this project, discuss the precarious underpinnings of not knowing the how, where and when of your next gig makes for a life of precarity that has been the subject of academic examination. Mark Deuze, a professor at Indiana University, in “*Media Work and The Recession*” attributes this precarity to changing ownership structures, fragmentation of audiences, new media technology trends changing the culture of production and reducing costs but then makes note of the media paradox where “The

number of media channels, forms, genres, devices, applications, and formats is proliferating – more media gets produced every year” (Deuze, Elefante & Steward, 2010).

The reality of precarity is embodied in the Precarious Workers Brigade, a UK-based group of workers in culture and education, calling attention to the exploitation of unpaid internships and struggling to make a living in this current economic client (<http://www.precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/>) -- they are playfully disguised in their portrait featured in the handbook (<http://carrotworkers.wordpress.com/about/>). In U.S. media, there is even stiffer competition for unpaid internships and students need to prove they are registered for an “internship course” just for the “opportunity” to work for free.

Rosalind Gill, author of *“Life is a Pitch: Managing the Self in New Media Work,”* discusses the ongoing tension of “being a new ideal worker–subject whose entire existence is built around work” (Gill at cited in Deuze et al., 2011). The examination of media workers willingly taking on risk as a normative practice in the 1980’s with the expectation of reward still fuels those working in the industry (Amman et, al., 2007; Neff, Wissinger & Zukin, 2005)

The Freelancer’s Union has become an advocate for the new workforce operating without a safety net. The proliferation of content farms charging a minimal amount for web content was a foreshadowing of not only rough times ahead for media folks but also an indicator that a dramatic shift was happening in the rest of the workforce. An article in The Economist in 2010, *“Emperors and Beggars; The Rise of Content Farms”* (<http://www.economist.com/node/16010291>) was foreshadowing a murky road ahead for the compression of media budgets. As the world is being flattened through technology (Friedman, 2005), so are the media budgets.

## **We Need A Less Anonymous Portrait of Media Workers**

In the article, *“Going the Extra Mile: Emotional and Commercial Imperatives in New Media Work,”* Helen Kennedy (2009) suggests, “like Terranova and Gill, that the autonomous creative/enslaved victim binary stereotypes of new media workers that predominate in the literature are inadequate, and that more nuanced understandings of the character of new media work are needed.” Kennedy states:

Consequently, much of the new media literature focusing on work and production processes continues to be characterized by dualism: whether waged or unwaged, new media workers are either creative and autonomous producer of culture for the digital economy, or they are victims enslaved to the mundane and low-paid elements of knowledge work or the grueling rhythms of insecure portfolio work. (Kennedy, 2009, p.180)

Many of the media freelancers involved with this project, having worked for decades, may have moments when they occasionally appear as either “enslaved victims or autonomous producers of culture” (Kennedy, 2009, p. 180) but they also are skilled career improvisers with the capacity to switch gears and adopt a variety of work styles. The media worker has been extensively examined but I wanted to move from academic anonymity to more personal stories of real people on the frontline of change and interweave with practices that inspire and remind us that change is possible at every juncture.

## **A Life Lived In Media**

Indiana University professor Mark Deuze accurately presents a life lived in media as a significant and regular feature of the contemporary landscape and describes “The Truman Show” as a metaphor for the inescapable media life. Yet at the end of the film, Truman walks off the fictitious stage of his so-called life – in reality, Deuze recognizes there is no escape. In the book, *Net Locality: Why Location Matters in a Networked World* the authors recognize a similar inescapable scenario of media immersion that is more positively, intimately connected to community-building:

We no longer ‘enter’ the web; we carry it with us. We access it via mobile, mapping, and location-aware technologies. It is embedded in all sorts of sensors and networked devices. . . Our physical location determines the types of information we retrieve online, and the people and things we find around us. It is true that technologies have become location aware; but it is also true that we have become more aware of locations. (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011, p. 172)

This location-enhancing media technology has the capability to link us in ways to foster connections that enhance personal and professional relationships.

## **A New Vision of Work and Leadership**

We are on the frontline of tumultuous economic and geopolitical changes and many of us are in transition. This requires a radical shift in thinking from a “go it alone” attitude to a relational realignment that we are in this together. For the folks involved in media it is not just about being talented in a particular medium but having the wherewithal to move into other domains with ease and that requires the improvisational ability to see connections and new ways of understanding leadership through a design mind-set:

In recent years, Richard Boland and his colleagues at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University have been building on the work of Herbert Simon and looking at leadership through the lens of what’s become known as the design mind-set. Simon noticed that we often think of managers as decision makers, and in fact most MBA programs focus on techniques for good analysis and decision making. Perhaps, he posited, we should think of leaders and managers differently, not as making decisions based on past data, but as creating forms so that people can flourish in the future. (Barrett, 2012)

Such a vision of leadership is needed in media as well. But as is the case with the culture of what constitutes work, the vision of leadership in media is also under transformation and will be explored in this research through the stories of these migrant creatives. According to *Free Press*, a media advocacy site promoting media reform as a way to transform democracy, “Massive corporations dominate the U.S. media landscape. Through a history of mergers and acquisitions, these companies have concentrated their control over what we see, hear and read” (<http://www.freepress.net/ownership/chart>). With fewer companies controlling media, the ability to make a living as a media freelancer will eventually have to be explored as a way to promote diversity of opinion and further the idea of democratic expression.

## **Relational Realignment Calms The Stress**

The guidance and direction we seek to stabilize systems may not come solely from government or academia but also internally as individuals find ways to center themselves from the daily storm of work and life compression. The popular proliferation in health care and yoga practices is a stunning example of an energetic imperative to slow down and “bring our whole self to work,” the title of a Harvard Business Review publication with authors such as Hallowell discussing escaping from multitasking in *“The Human Moment at Work”* and Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz examining the high-performance state when we integrate mind, body, and spirit in the workplace *“The Making of a Corporate Athlete”* (Harvard Business Review, 2008).

We are on the cusp of taking a more holistic view of work with less separation between the personal and professional due to mobile technology changes. There is a shift as companies realize that stress challenges on the home and work front affect both worlds. The lines of demarcation between work and home life are blurrier. Many of the creative individuals involved with this project, especially in production, recognize the importance of healthful practices such as rest, balanced nutrition, and exercise as a necessity in the creative industries. This is further explored in the chapter *“The Generative Years: Living What’s Next.”*

## **New Attitudes Regarding Creativity and Aging Are Bridging The Generational Divide**

The benefits of a healthier lifestyle are not only prolonging our life, but also enabling people to stay engaged and active on the work front longer. The participants in this dissertation discuss aging and mentoring in a youth-focused media industry. New attitudes toward aging and creativity are shifting as a result of people staying in the workforce past retirement and new studies are challenging the notion that creativity declines with age.

Gene Cohen, pioneering researcher in the area of geriatric psychiatry, questions the notion that “older adults can’t learn as well as young people” (Cohen, 2005, 2006). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, explored the lives of creative individuals and in the study the participants expressed little change as they aged regarding their accomplishments (1996). Mary and Kenneth Gergen’s digital *“Positive Aging Newsletter”* challenges the “longstanding view of aging as decline, the newsletter provides resources for understanding aging as an unprecedented period of human development” (<http://www.taosinstitute.net/positive-aging-newsletter>).

The statistics that “Boomers intend to keep working well past the age of 54 in far greater numbers than previous generations” (Newman, K., 2011, p. 136) is changing the workforce and is reflected with these project participants. Many of the participants take on active mentoring roles with younger co-workers and this helps to bridge the generational divide; and they are also becoming role models for a more robust, creative intergenerational workforce. Rob Salkowitz, in *Generation Blend: Managing Across the Technology Age Gap*, (2008) explores the positive synergy posed by intergenerational teams especially between Baby Boomers and Millennials.



## Entertaining Appreciation and Imagining a Different Future

Peggy Holman author of *Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval into Opportunity* (2010) and co-author of *The Change Handbook: The Definitive Resource on Today's Best Methods for Engaging Whole Systems* (Holman, Devane & Cady, 2007) presents an open approach to living with dynamic change and this requires embracing mystery along with setting aside assumptions and the willingness to say, "'I don't know' and 'We're making it up as we go along.'" These are the today's forms of courage and strength. Stand on the shore of the known world and step into the creative waters of the unknown" (Holman, 2010, p. 84). Creativity is not just about what we produce but how we respond to life's challenges as presented. As Holman notes, "It takes both exuberance and mindfulness. Pioneers thriving in this territory, exploring the differences, perspectives, ideas, and dreams among us that make for creative engagement" (Holman, 2010, p. 84-85).

Stewart Brand innovator, activist and creator of the *Whole Earth Catalog* is an example of how our ideas can change the world with his *The Long Now Foundation*, which "hopes to provide a counterpoint to today's accelerating culture and help make long-term thinking more common." He is another example of the power of community engagement that will positively impact the future. Click here to visit his website (<http://longnow.org/about/>).

*The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter* creates a forum for conversation and connections. "The World café is a good, simple process for bringing people together around questions that matter. . .It doesn't matter who the people are – the process works. It works because people can work well together, can be creative and caring and insightful when they're actively engaged in meaningful conversations around questions that count" (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. ix, x). The book *Community: The Structure of Belonging* discusses how "the conventional belief is that transformation leads to transformation" but the process begins in "the context in which the gatherings take place; when we work hard on getting the questions right; when we choose depth over speed and relatedness over scale" (Block, 2009, p. 73).

*Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* written by C. Otto Scharmer, a professor at MIT, presents a more nuanced portrait of nuanced attending, co-sensing, listening, and presencing with an open mind and heart that promotes deeper connections and intentions to create the future (2009). *Sacred Economics: Money, Gift & Society in the Age of Transition* (Eisenstein, 2011) offers an alternative viewpoint on work and reward.

## Conclusion

Many aspects of Appreciative Inquiry, an examination of what is working in the organizational realm, is moving into the everyday as evidenced with the book *Appreciative Living: The Principles of Appreciative Inquiry in Personal Life* (Kelm, 2005). All of the above efforts and individuals are inviting us to imagine a different future, which includes the notion of not only having a career but also a life that works for you. With increased competition and compressed wages, the media freelancers involved with this project are demonstrating that this work style does not have the same standalone capacity it had before. They are hanging on but also considering new possibilities by shifting to full-time, part-time, returning to school, working on their own creative projects, maintaining freelance while some are

moving to the entrepreneurial realm. The project participants are a microcosm for a tremendous improvisational shift happening throughout the entire economy.

Is this kind of work sustainable for even the most experienced freelancers? Marc Jaffe, the comedy writer and philanthropist, suggests that freelancers need to examine their career from a long-term perspective, “*You have to look at freelance as a whole career and there will be times when I will have a steady paycheck and times when I won't*” (Jaffe, see *The Liminal Freelance Landscape*).

While the rest of the workforce is gravitating toward more flexible employment, the freelancers involved with this project are already a step ahead because they have been in the self-employed domain for a long time. They represent a new movement toward career improvisation and the juggling act of balancing multiple career styles – many at the same time. Thus drawing on a constructions perspective, I am interested in closing the gap on the personal narrative of media workers at the crossroads of a changing economy, technology, and work culture. Using an appreciative and relational perspective, the curtain of anonymity in the lives of media workers will be pulled back on both the personal and professional fronts. On this stage, the media worker gets to tell the making of his/her own story in the changing market place. All of the aforementioned literature is merely a small portion of the ideas shaping this dissertation along with appreciative inquiry, dialogic engagement, and social constructionist thinkers and writers who have influenced my ideas and are featured in the four chapters that constitute *The Macro Narratives*.



### III. Methodology

***“You have to be tactical. You have to adapt. As the industry changes, you have to learn how to change with it. A lot of times somebody says, ‘nobody wants to buy Westerns.’ That’s exactly the time to write a Western – when nobody else is doing it. When nobody’s doing this – it’s the time to do that.”***

***Alan B. McElroy, Screenwriter***

# Methodology

## Revealing the Story Behind the Story

### Where To Begin? Let's Start With Softball and Then Run

This dissertation is a relational and heuristic journey that starts with the introduction of my doctoral program through the serendipitous route of playing softball. Here I played on a unique softball team started by David and Alice Kolb, both involved with the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) in Cleveland, Ohio and pioneering innovators in the arena of experiential learning. This softball field became a learning laboratory for play and this continuous pickup game is still going strong under the name "Free Play Softball League."

As David A. Kolb, the team founder notes in the article *Learning to play, playing to learn*, "softball was too much fun to be left only to those who could play well" (Kolb & Kolb, 2010) and I agree. The early history of the team started out as a typically competitive intramural slugfest in the mid-1970s at Case Western Reserve University between different departments and fraternity groups. The games became increasingly aggressive and competitive over time. As Kolb reveals, "the OB team, which was much more inclusive when it came to its composition (composed of men, women, and physically disabled individuals with varying skill levels) found itself at a disadvantage playing against highly skilled competitive, intramural teams" (Kolb & Kolb, 2010).

The formation of a new league was an attempt to have a game that was inclusive and welcoming to all skill levels. In 1991, a new team was initiated by a pressure-free invitation via a friends asking friends search. The team that morphed over time was an enthusiastic, motley crew of folks from all walks of life, skill levels, gender, shapes, ages, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds who showed up every Sunday to play from April to November (or until the first big snow). Our weekly softball game was a special place, and we all recognized it, but rarely discussed what it meant to us on a personal level maybe because we did not want to spoil the magic. When attending a great party, you do not sit and analyze what is working at the time, but just enjoy and later reflect on the experience.

I was a single mom teaching adjunct contemporary cinema and screenwriting courses while also working as a freelance multimedia writer after moving back to Cleveland in order to deal and heal from a divorce, bankruptcy and a dying parent. I vividly remember the day at the local Starbucks, enjoying time with my six-year-old daughter Liz, when a close friend casually invited me to play softball. Liz incredulously said, "you can't play softball," and I decided to prove her wrong (although she was right). In 1998, I started playing softball with

extremely limited “competence” but later found myself changing in surprising ways, I became comfortable being uncomfortable and enjoying the act of play without pressure. “There was absolutely no judgment. I jokingly called it the ‘sheltered workshop of play.’ Even if I stopped the ball with my head, someone would say – ‘nice stop’ without an ounce of sarcasm” (Goldman, 2002, in Kolb & Kolb 2010).

Every Sunday we meet to get our play fix. There’s no drama or social pressure. It’s our Sunday ritual – a space for a different kind of communion. NO appointed coaches, NO membership fees, NO team name or use of last names, NO pressure to show up and NO tryout. Nobody cares what you do during the week. In fact, most of us know very little about each other’s personal lives – basically we come to play. (Goldman, 2002, in Kolb & Kolb 2010)

This was a softball dreamland. The camaraderie was generative, boisterous, playful, and provided a weekly inoculation from the daily grind. Anyone who showed up, between 10 a.m. and noon, would be arbitrarily assigned to one team or the other so the lineup was continuously changing. You instinctively learned to play nice because you never knew where you would land in the lineup next week.

When David and Alice Kolb reflect on the team, they were conscious of building a different kind of sport field that integrates play and learning:

In our recent research on experiential learning, we have focused on the importance of learning spaces and developed principles for creating them (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). For a learner to engage fully in the learning cycle, a space must be provided to engage fully in the four modes of the cycle – feeling, reflection, thinking, and action. It needs to be a hospitable, welcoming space that is characterized by respect for all. It needs to be safe and supportive, but also challenging. It must allow learners to be in charge of their own learning and allow time for the repetitive practice that develops expertise. (Kolb & Kolb 2010)

## **The Constantly Changing Lineup Reminiscent of Freelance**

This non-competitive, referee-free environment of “The Free Play League” is foreign territory for folks used to a traditional sports structure, but I found the “show up and play” movement of the players reminiscent of freelance work. As one of the participant’s states:

The game was chaotic and disorganized. It was a fun chaos, which made attractive to join. You never knew who would show up. I don’t think the game would have been attractive if it was completely organized like a professional sport team. Because you never knew what you would get every week, you needed to be spontaneous and ready to improvise. If there was no short stop, I would go play short stop. If there was no outfielder, I would go and fill that position. Everybody played the position that needed to be filled at that time. That added variety to the game. Because of the unpredictability of the game, it all came down to relationship. For me, it was more about meeting people I like in a different setting and strengthening that relationship. (Kolb & Kolb, 2010)

The constant variety provided by the changing team lineup, with people coming and going

through normal attrition, is reminiscent of the shifting workforce in the freelance world. You never really know the full details of your assignment when entering a new company and improvisation is key. Professionalism is not “just a matter of memorizing a set of rules or a stock of explicit knowledge. You’re learning to absorb a whole way of being – picking up practices, rather than learning about practices” (Barrett, 2012, p. 107). The improvisation on the field is similar to temporarily joining a company or organization to work on a client project. You often have limited knowledge of the other team members’ capabilities or what the client wants. There is no time to get upset by ineptitude or office politics. You insert yourself in a group and learn about their practices by doing and then you move forward together.

In a way, the short-timer attitude keeps the relationship fresh and playful because you are in a heightened state of discovering new things about the project or people you are working with and then leave. Even if you come back, enough time has elapsed so you have plenty to discuss and it reenergizes the relationship. With freelance, you do not have the longevity or familiarity to be dismissive or take people for granted at work and this also applies to the playing field. You have some team players who are consistent regulars and then others who show up infrequently depending on their schedule. No matter who shows up and when, it is always a joyous occasion when you reconnect rather than an obligation, considering there are no expectations to be there in the first place.

## **Entering A New Playing Field**

After seven years of playing on this team, I learned firsthand the power of appreciative kindness and relational connectedness -- a celebration of encouraging what is working rather than focusing on negativity to heighten our position in the pecking order. There was a civility that was carried by all the players. “Deep learning was promoted within this ludic learning space, where players intentionally engaged in playful behavior to learn and develop the skill to play the game, and extended the playful attitude toward a deeper commitment to character building and personal change” (Kolb & Kolb, 2010).

As a catalyst for growth and change, I could envision this positive realignment being applied to all areas of organizational life. This game inspired me to jump out of my comfort zone and try new things without worrying about performance pressure. In our highly competitive culture, we are rarely challenged to play unless proficient: “As adults, we are taught to work with our strengths. It is ‘playing’ and working with my weaknesses that has given me the greatest strength” (Goldman, 2002, in Kolb & Kolb 2010). The learning that emerged on the field was impactful for many of the players:

In addition to the fun and fellowship there was a lot of learning going on in the Free Play Softball League. Most of the regular players reported significant deep learning from their participation. Some of this learning involved development of the basic skills of hitting, fielding running and throwing and greater understanding of position play, game, strategy, and teamwork. Many, however, reported learning that was deeper and more personal, contributing to their personal growth and development in all areas of their life. They spoke of gaining courage to fail, of controlling negative emotion and competitiveness, of developing empathy and personal authenticity. What was striking was that most often they attributed this learning not to any

teacher, coach or other person, but to the nature of the space created by the game itself, what we are calling the ludic learning space. (Kolb & Kolb, 2010)

With newfound strength, I was one of those people challenged to try something new. Alice Kolb, knowing that I was seeking a doctoral program, casually mentioned the PhD Program at Taos Institute/Tilburg University co-founded by her coworker David Cooperrider who was working in the pioneering domain of Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University. Appreciative Inquiry is a change management process, “In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives ‘life’ to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). There were appreciative moments modeled on the field where I observed the importance of encouraging teammates by focusing on what was working rather than engaging in a trash-talking “deficit discourse” that goes nowhere (Gergen K., 1994). The conversations that make a difference allow a space for “creating something anew” (McNamee & Shotter, 2004).

The doctoral program that Alice Kolb casually mentioned on the sidelines of our softball game resurfaced when I started investigating Ph.D. programs. This “seemingly” sidebar discussion propelled me toward a social constructionist practice that examines how our conversations and relationships create meaning and generate change. Even after leaving the team for a job teaching communications in 2004, the lessons learned on the field are still with me and continue. In fall 2009, I entered The Taos Institute/Tilburg University Ph.D. program, immersed in a Social Constructionist framework and Appreciative Inquiry, which offered the freedom and fluidity to study while working and here I entered a new field.

This dissertation, *The Migrant Creative: U.S. Media Freelancers at the Border of a Changing Work Culture*, is a collection of conversations with eleven media freelancers discussing the shape shifting required to work in the liminal landscape of this emerging new economy. The inquiry uses the notion of “liminal space” to position, describe, and create the experience of media workers’ life at the border of a changing work culture.

I draw on Social Constructionist Theory (Burr, 1995; Gergen & Gergen, 2008), Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999, 2005; Holman, 2010), and dialogic engagement (Anderson & Gehart, 2007; McNamee, 2004, 2005) to understand media freelance culture where negotiation (Putnam, 2004), collaboration and conversation present challenging, provocative ideas (Dixon & Adamson, 2012) that are critical, continuous throughout the freelance process. The design, data collection and analysis were all relationally informed process, which I briefly describe below. I will subsequently describe in depth my research process, practices and tools used.

## **Engagement With Participants Is Relationally Connected**

Reflecting the value of relationships in social construction, I intentionally invited media freelancers with whom I was connected to be a part of this project and welcomed shared engagement when it came to sharing their story as it was seen through an appreciative, socially constructed, and dialogic lens. The participants, mentioned in the “Introduction,” agreed to collaborate because of their generosity of spirit but also because they knew that freelance is often a devalued work narrative and one that deserves more scrutiny because it

is single-handedly challenging what is traditionally considered a “real job.” These seasoned freelancers not only have years of experience successfully improvising in media, but also have valuable lessons and insight to share in the entrepreneurial realm.

Our previous relationship, built on trust and familiarity with their work, allowed for a freer dialogue to emerge coupled with the fact that they were less guarded because they knew that they were allowed to edit and approve their transcripts along with the appreciative reflections because their name was going to be attached to the project.

There are research practitioners that would argue that this familiarity would discredit the collection process and I disagree. What I found is that a different story emerged and it was quite intimate, compelling, and revealing because of our friendship. The participants felt no need to self-censor because approval safeguards were in place that allowed them to have control of their transcript and appreciative reflections (see *Analysis* section in *Methodology*).

## Discovering Another Kind of Academic Voice

As a latecomer to academic research, the tedious task of reading academic articles often required copious amounts of coffee and a cast-iron stomach for translating some of the obtuse academic jargon. I found a role model in Laurel Richardson, a masterful qualitative researcher and storyteller, after reading her comment on stodgy academic writing:

Countless numbers of texts had I abandoned half read, half scanned. I would order a new book with great anticipation – the topic was one I was interested in, the author was someone I wanted to read – only to find the text boring. (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, 959)

As a storyteller and weaver of many different viewpoints, my adviser and academic program encouraged “a form of writing that any literate audience can understand. Is the dissertation readable, informative, and possibly even enjoyable to readers – for both lay and scholarly audiences alike?” (Taos/Tilburg Ph.D. Program Criteria for Excellence). It was a relief to find a program where I did not feel that I was committing academic treason by inserting the relational self or weaving commentary across disciplines or employing a mashup of techniques including polyvocality, performance, and repositioning the personal. Why do we embrace this scientific distancing and authoritative all-knowing stance? Laurel Richardson offers one view:

In scientific writing, authority has been accomplished through the ‘effacement of the speaking and experiencing scientists’ (Pratt 1986, 32). Neither ‘I’ nor ‘we’ are used. With no apparent narrator, an illusion of objectivity is created. The implied narrator is godlike, an all-knowing voice from afar and above, stripped of all human subjectivity and fallibility. But in fact, science does have a human narrator, the camouflaged first-person, hiding in the bramble of the passive voice. Omniscience is imaginary, possible only in fiction. (Richardson, 1997, p. 18)

Laurel Richardson, in an article *Getting Personal: Writing Stories*, suggests that researchers are always writing about their lives and then shrouding it in the omniscient voice of science

and yet it breaks through: “In the social sciences, try as writers do to suppress their humanity, thankfully it keeps erupting I their choice of metaphors, topics, and discourses” (Richardson, 2001). Richardson acknowledges the social construction of research and states, “Language is a constitutive force, creating a particular view of reality and the Self. No textual staging is ever innocent (including this one). Styles of writing are neither fixed nor neutral but reflect the historically shifting domination of particular schools of paradigms” (Richardson, 2000). Would I be writing in this personal style if not in a doctoral program that embraces the emergence of an academic voice that values relational knowledge?

In the Taos/Tilburg doctoral program, I was at home discovering an academic writing style that suited my first person, present tense narrative approach and where my adviser engaged and validated an intuitive, creative expression. In fact, she suggested reading *A Woman’s Way of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* where there is a recognizable shift “away from an earlier assumption of ‘truth from above’ to a belief in multiple personal truths” (Belenky et al., 1986 p. 66). This positioning changes the tone from a strident scientific stance stating, “this is my conclusion” to a chorus voicing, “this is our experience.”

The humanizing idea of narrative as a relational performance and inviting in multiple voices and viewpoints was emerging through my reading (Gergen, 2009). With qualitative writing, I discovered a wide variety of narrative styles and that allowed for a participatory and relational realignment – a place where the “I” and “we” were invited back into the story along with interdisciplinary commentary that made the process personal, professional, enjoyable – and relational. “Writing and relationship” is not merely between the researcher and those under study but is also extended to the writer and also to the audience, “Alternative ethnographers break away from the conventions of social science inscription to experiment with polyvocality, poetry, pastiche, performance, and more. These experiments open new territories of expression; they also offer new spaces of relationship” (Gergen & Gergen, 2002).

## The Research Question

The central question propelling this dissertation examines, “what is the lived experience of a media freelancer at the border of a changing work culture?” That question also leads to stories of “how” they create a life in this culture and the *Appreciative Reflections* situate the reader in their lived experience. From a constructionist perspective, the description is a process of not only storytelling but also storymaking. The process of making is how we describe objects, experiences, and people. How do the stories we tell about work contribute to our lived experience? In exploring the story of these participants, I am aware that it is shaped by the way I/we make and tell the story. *The Appreciative Reflection* is not only about telling their story but also about how we shape the experience through an appreciative lens.

## The Storymaking and Storytelling Process: A Mash-up Of Approaches

All of research is a storymaking process, from research question to presentation. My process was a mash-up of narrative research and dialogic approaches, which included: conversational and polyphonic interviewing (Fontana & Frey, 2003, 2005); autoethnography (Jones, 2005; Richardson, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2003); collaborative research (Bava, 2005; McNamee, 2000); performative social science (Gergen & Gergen, 2011; Bava, 2005) and narrative life histories (Chase, 2005; Richardson & St. Pierre).

A two-tiered storytelling process consisted of a micro and macro narrative framework. The micro narrative, a 6-10 page interactive Appreciative Reflection, was inspired by Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1995, 2005; Stavros & Torres, 2005). The reflection allowed for a distillation of valuable lessons learned from each person (see *Appreciative Reflection*) during our lengthy conversations (see *Conversations*) and look at the scope of an entire career without fixating solely on compressed budgets and increased expectations during a deep economic recession (2010). The eleven Appreciative Reflections individually profiled each freelancer as they discussed performance in their discipline. All reflections collectively provided a kaleidoscopic, polyphonic view of many aspects of the industry. The attraction to polyphonic interviewing (see *Polyphonic Interviewing*) is reflective of documentary filmmaking where many voices and commentary add diversity to the ideas presented (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 709).

As part of a collaborative process, the participants graciously edited and were free to make any revisions, changes or clarifications. They were asked to review their transcripts (30-50 pages) and Appreciative Reflections (see *Appreciative Reflection*) that were 6-10 pages in length for coherence and then all the participants approved their bios, transcript, and Appreciative Reflection before attaching their name to the project (see *The Conversations*). Prior to the conversation, the participants had sent a personal bio and they received a permission consent form to look over coupled with broad-based questions in advance (See *Permission Consent Form* and *Questions* sections). All of the eleven conversations were conducted in the summer 2010 where I traveled to meet with the project participants in Cleveland, Ohio, upstate New York, and Atlanta, Georgia through funding provided by a Winston-Salem State University travel research grant.

Before moving into the academic realm, I was a media practitioner versed in multimedia writing: fiction and nonfiction screenwriting, public relations, advertising, documentary, radio, and Internet. The vast majority of my creative projects were dually designed to not only convey information but also engage the reader and weave multiple voices and perspectives (e.g. screenwriting and documentary). My limited background in traditional academic qualitative research techniques allowed for experimentation and an opportunity to discover a compatible style when it came to research, interviewing, writing and the use of media technology. On this journey, I discovered performative research and inquiry along with polyphonic interviewing techniques that shape this project.



## Performative Research and Inquiry

Dr. Saliha Bava, my adviser, was instrumental, inventive and intuitive when it came to introducing stylistically compatible research and interview practices after meeting me and learning about my creative process. Aware of my multimedia writing background, she encouraged my storytelling strengths and suggested preliminary reading in the area of performative research and inquiry, opening my eyes to a new way of engaging with the participant that provided a collaborative, conversational learning stance that invited people to participate rather than a distancing interview style.

The introduction of materials gave credence to the idea of collaborative research as an elegant dance of learning where interviewers and interviewees can take turns leading (Kvale, 1996; Bava, 2005; Gehart, et al., 2007). This was a stark contrast to the interviewing style often advocated in journalistic texts, which stresses keeping a professional distance, “Generally, don’t share your personal experiences, train yourself to be brief and direct. The more straightforward you are, the better your responses will be” (Papper, 2006).

Intuitively, I gravitated toward a conversational rather than a journalistic interview stance and purposefully invited in moments of dialogic engagement and meandering precisely because it led to something for more interesting (McNamee and Shotter, 2004). For instance, after concluding the interview with the screenwriter Alan McElroy and turning off the recorder, we started casually talking about the monetary realities of the screenwriting industry. He was revealing about financial remuneration and the tape recorder was immediately turned back on with his permission. These kind of personal “off the topic” moments create something far more interesting than just following the prescribed interview script.

Our conversations and subsequent appreciative reflections were performative from the standpoint that it brought to life the world that each freelancer was creating as they spoke of it. “The actual sense of the other is derived through embodied experience of the other’s cultural practice,” according to Bryant Alexander and this is when ethnography shifts to performance, “It reinstates the actualization of everyday cultural performance rehydrates the objectified, text-bound descriptions of lives-lived into living embodied forms that offer a greater sense of direct experience and the direct knowledge of a culture” (B. Alexander, 2005, p. 415). A performative approach invites “reflection on how we are creating that which we speak of in the process of speaking or acting on it” (Bava, personal communication, 2012).

Performance is a social constructionist (Anderson, 1997; Bava, 2003; K. Gergen, 1991, 1994a, 1994b, 1999; M. Gergen, 2001) notion of meaning making as a communal process, in that it occurs in language and dialogue. Performance metaphorically expands the symbolic meaning of dialogue. Such practice raises our reflexivity and heightens our sensitivity to the notion of shared inquiry as we ask one another, ‘what are we doing here?’ (M. Gergen, 2001)” (Bava, 2005)

As an academic with an interdisciplinary mindset, performance and inquiry was woven throughout this dissertation: Initially, the interview performance allowed for improvisation to

occur within the conversation; and the interactive sources embedded within the text allowed for greater exploration of the participants' multimedia performances while also recognizing the readers' interaction or shared performance with the materials presented. Bava reveals, "Performance allows for the unorthodox to occur. It has created a blurring of boundaries between science and fiction, academia and the arts (Bava, 2001; M. Gergen, 2001; Piercy & Benson, 2005)" (Bava, 2005, p. 175).

Performance obscures the traditional separation between science and art and this "orientation invites exploration into ambiguity, subtle nuance, and contradiction" while "expanding the possibilities of representation – using, theater, art of multi-media, for example" (Gergen & Gergen, 2011, 295). There is the realization that performance not only allows for interdisciplinary collaboration as in my case with the melding of commentary from many fields (e.g. communications, organizational behavior, and media) but also creates an opening in the sciences for "the inclusion of multiple traditions, and thus they become more polyvocal, dialogic, and democratic (Gergen & Gergen, 2011, 296). The appreciative reflections allow the audience to experience the participants' work through access to the Internet.

In this research, through the appreciative reflections or individual stories of each media freelancer (micro narrative), we are introduced to the cast of characters before reading the collective stories weaving commonalities and differences with their freelance experiences (macro narrative). "Sociologists have used the term 'micro/macro' to refer to the leap from understanding individual cases or parts to understanding the system as a whole (Collins, 1981)" (Stake, 2005, p. 462n25). In this case, we become familiar with the individual micro narrative work histories in the Appreciative Reflections and this approach allows for a more intimate experience for the reader.

## **Polyphonic Interviewing**

For this dissertation, there were eleven conversations with freelancers across a wide multimedia expanse. Because they are so uniquely positioned in various disciplines (e.g. audio, documentary, screenwriting, etc.) I thought that their voices should reveal their freelance work stories in the micro narratives, the Appreciative Reflections, and then I would weave commonalities and differences as a chorus into the chapters or macro narratives.

The idea of polyphonic interviewing captured my imagination where sociologists "Marcus and Fischer voiced reflexive concerns about the ways in which the researcher influences the study, both in the methods of data collection and in the techniques of reporting findings" (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Polyphonic interviewing was viewed as a way to reduce the influence of the interviewer:

. . .where the voices of the respondents are recorded with minimal influence from the researcher and are not collapsed together and reported as one through the interpretation of the researcher. Instead, the multiple perspectives of the various respondents are reported, and differences and problems are discussed rather than glossed over (Krieger, 1983). (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 709)

With this technique, the reader hears many voices including my own as I frame the story of my relationship to each of the media freelancers, along with their personal work narrative and this is interwoven with commentary from experts in social construction, psychology, appreciative inquiry, communication, and other pertinent areas.

## **Autoethnography**

The humanizing view of narrative as a relational performance was expanded to the utilization of autoethnography, which was used to primarily situate my relationship with the participants in the forthcoming *Appreciative Reflections* and also insert my voice of knowing about freelance into the conversation. As noted in *Ethnographic Representation As Relationship*, a sense of the real and relatable is reclaimed:

Autoethnography represents a significant expansion in both ethnographic form and relational potential. In using oneself as an ethnographic exemplar, the researcher is freed from the traditional conventions of writing. One's unique voice – complete with colloquialisms, reverberations from multiple relationships, and emotional expressiveness – is honored. In this way the reader gains a sense of the writer as a full human being. (Gergen & Gergen, 2002)

As Richardson notes in *New Writing Practices in Qualitative Research*, “One form of evocative writing is autoethnography. These are highly personalized, revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lived experience, relating the personal to the cultural” (Richardson, 2000, p. 11). Autoethnography was primarily used to situate my relationship with the project participants in the *Appreciative Reflections*.

## **Work History Story Seen Through An Appreciative Lens**

The “Appreciative Reflections” used the lens of appreciative inquiry to focus on what was working for the individual media freelancers (see *Appreciative Reflection: A Creative Collage of Narrative Styles* at end of Methodology). The larger narrative umbrella is the work history, which captures the individual story of the participant's freelance career path, and is reminiscent of life history.

In *Narrative Inquiry: Multiple Lenses, Approaches, Voices*, Susan E. Chase notes that there is great range in the presentation of life stories – from a full biography, to an “autobiographical story in the person's own words (for the complexity of these terms see Bertaux, 1981; Frank, 2000). Yet some researchers treat the terms life history and life story as interchangeable, defining both as birth-to-present narratives (Atkinson, 2002)” (Chase, 2005 in Denzin & Lincoln, p. 652). Chase also points out that a life story can work with smaller increments that include a pivotal moment or turning point in one's life (p. 652) and that is how I interpreted the work stories. The individual stories were developed as series of vignettes to reveal what changed, challenged or shaped the participants' work history.

These stories captured a sense of everyday people on the employment front and left a poignant impression of the how Americans are staying afloat. The freelancers involved with this project are the people who toil anonymous behind the scenes and I wanted to give them a name, face, and platform to share their story. This is a socially situated

construction where relationship is paramount to getting the story told and telling the story. If it were not for our friendship, they would not have been included and because of our friendship they felt more comfortable participating. Because of the strength of our relationship, I was able to elicit a more intimate portrait of working as a freelancer.

## **The Technological Tools for Recording Dissertation Process and Progress**

### **Digital Diary**

Even before starting the dissertation in fall 2009, my adviser, Saliha Bava, Ph.D., suggested numerous digital practices that have been helpful when it comes to retracing my dissertation journey and one was a diary. I stopped writing the diary after all eleven of the final appreciative reflections were approved (November 2011) and the chapter writing was underway. To be honest, the diary is useful as I evaluate my beginning steps since the process started over three years ago. The 150-pages initially started with insightful commentary and eventually just held email correspondence with my adviser or project participants. As I recall my steps, I am finding it useful tool for remembering process and progress.

### **Digital Portfolio: Backup in a Cloud is Essential**

Throughout the dissertation process, ibook was utilized for digital backup of files – and additional thumb drives to backup the backup. Then I also put my dissertation on a foliotek.com digital portfolio cloud, in case of a natural or unnatural disaster, I could save everything and also have a forum for sharing or examining my work in progress.

Because I am a visual learner, I appreciated the capacity of foliotek.com (<http://www.foliotek.com>) to not only save my documents in a cloud, but also allow others to access the documents with code and permission to show work for specific increments of time. It was through foliotek.com that all the project participants were all able to read and access all the Appreciative Reflections. As suggested, it is critical to safeguard your work with multiple digital systems. It also served as a visual marker of progress and provided the big picture of how the elements were connected.

### **Mindmapping - CMAP**

In fall, 2009, it was suggested by my adviser after examining my writing style that there were lots of non-linear associations. She suggested CMAP to help me organize emerging and incoming ideas and then stop back and look at the relationships and associated connections.

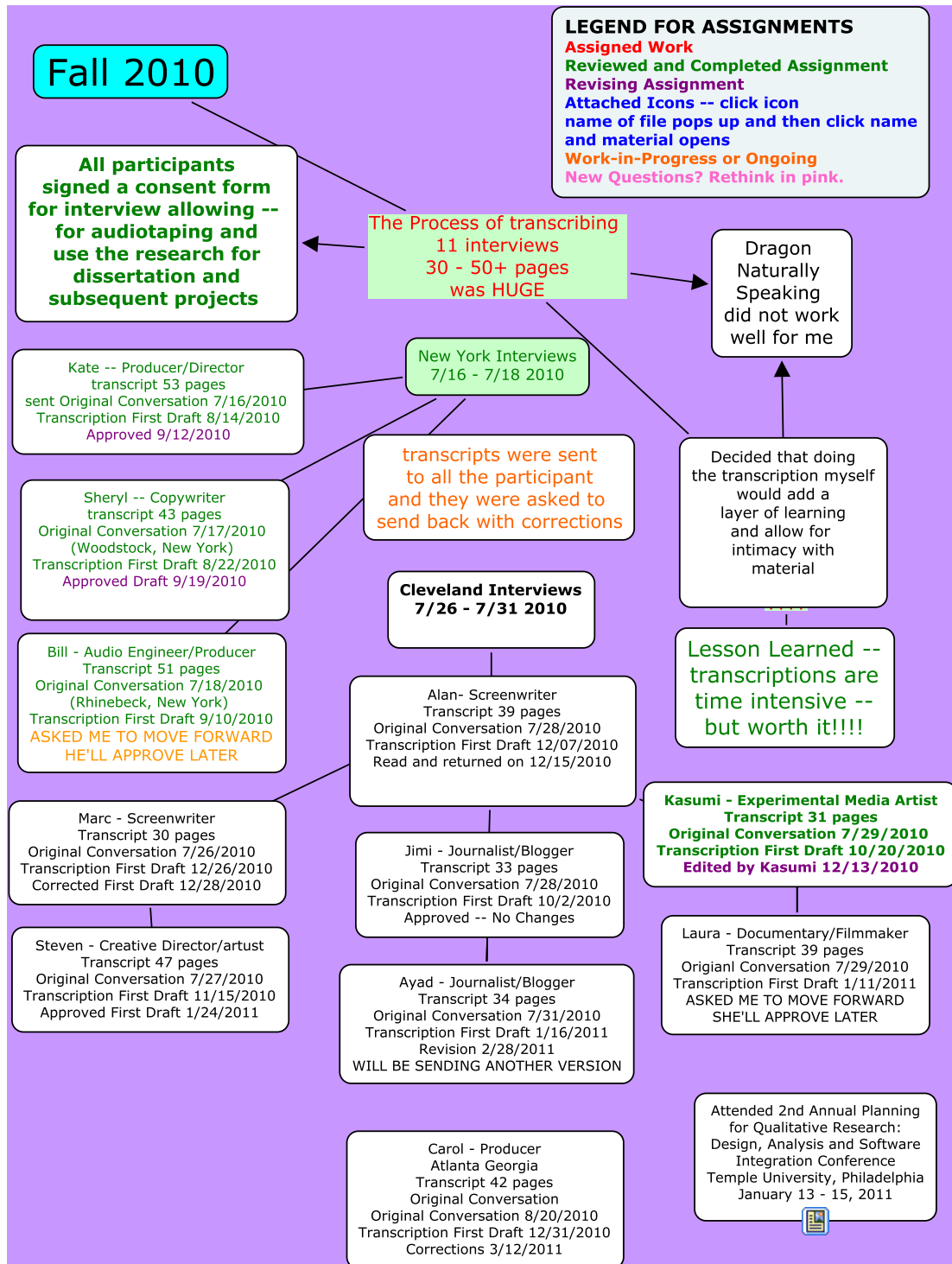
This was another useful tool for visually charting this dissertation journey and later it turned into a cumbersome problem so I would recommend that you keep it “private.” Here I could put my thoughts and linkages for each semester onto a visual page and then add

documents, articles, or conferences attended for safekeeping. It is a wonderful organizational tool and I used it for three semesters starting in fall, 2009.

CMAPI became problematic when I made it available on my abstract and since it was in a public/private folder did not imagine that it would migrate in bits and pieces to become part of google documents. It was not easy to retrieve the materials and I decided to dismantle the public component and pull the plug.

I do not want it public because of the confidential nature of some of the information and the premature work in progress of some of the pieces. Since then, I have spent a lot of time dismantling sites so I do not want to bring it to fruition in this dissertation. If you are going to use CMAPI, the visual tool is great – just DO NOT make it public. The tool is free if you are affiliated with an academic institution. If you want to explore, view a demonstration, or access the site go to: (<http://cmap.ihmc.us/>). The following Figure 1 on the next page shows a condensed version of a one-page CMAPI fall semester 2010.

Figure 1 CMAP example



## **Refworks for Bibliographic Entries and Retrieval**

Refworks was utilized early on in the dissertation process. It is great for compiling and accessing bibliographic listings. This is an essential tool. In my dissertation, there are 400+ bibliographic listings for articles, journals, blogs, and books with abstracts in a variety of accessible folders. It allows me to put bibliographic listings into a variety of citation styles such as APA, Chicago, etc. For any researcher, this is a must-have tool and a worthwhile website to check out. Click to visit the Refworks website (<http://www.refworks.com/>).

## **Setting the Stage for Collecting Data**

### **Initial Invitation to the Participants**

In mid-July 2009, a phone call was initiated with many friends in the freelance world to see if they would be interesting in becoming involved with this project. My immediate thought as a former freelance multimedia writer and producer was to start with my friends many of them lived in Ohio, New York, California, Arizona, North Carolina, and Georgia. I made a list of people I have known for decades and/or personally know their work or reputation. I was surprised to immediately jot down around 18 names. The intention was not to make it a one-sided interview but to foster creative engagement with this research process. This project was also a chance to reconnect and check-in with folks that I genuinely admired and appreciated.

### **Interview Matrix**

In August 2009, I started working on my interview matrix with bios and background materials to highlight the dissertation participants and here I added bios, contact information, and personalized photos. The photographs made the process more real and personal for me – and the intention was to also introduce my adviser to the participants in a more engaging fashion. Also the use of graphics with stylized headlines and subheads along with plenty of white space allowed for visual engagement and readability. Initially there were 18 participants and eventually we whittled it down to 11 after seeing how much material we had to work with at the time. Unfortunately, I never utilized the people living in North Carolina or the West Coast due to time constraints, monies, and a significant amount of material already collected. Because of confidentiality, I did not include the interview matrix in the Appendix.

### **The Participant Consent Form**

In November 2009, my adviser sent me some rough preliminary forms as an idea of how to adapt a permission form. The preliminary permission consent form was completed in November 2009 and revised in June 2010 before heading to interview the project participants starting in July 2010. The consent forms were sent in advance of the summer 2010 interviews along with a companion email so they knew what to expect and could ask questions beforehand. The following excerpts from the participant consent form stress the

collaborative nature of the project, the fact that the participants can leave the project at any time, the length of the interview, and the can use their own name or they can choose a fictitious one if desired:

The Taos/Tilburg doctoral program, applying Social Constructionist theory and Appreciative Inquiry practices, examines how dialogue positively transforms individual, organizational and collective realities to create meaning. These collaborative inquiry practices are incorporated in the research process. As a participant, you are invited to be part of the conversation. This performance research methodology of mutual discovery is intended to benefit both the investigator and participant.

In our hectic lives, we often do not get to reflect on our relationship with work. We are here to jointly study the topic and share thoughts on our freelance experiences. Before our first interview, we will briefly discuss a critical issue that concerns you as a media freelancer and/or someone associated with contract workers. Relevant questions pertinent to your area of interest will be developed for the first conversation and sent via email. The interview, anywhere from 1½ to 2 hours, will be conducted in person. The conversation will be personalized and varied in an effort to gather multiple perspectives. If a follow-up call is needed to clarify or expand a topic, the conversation (via Skype or phone) will be arranged with your permission and prior consent.

Throughout this project, and with your permission, I will discreetly make an audio recording of some of our conversations in order to have a record of our discussion. The recordings will be considered part of data for this project. At any time during our conversation, you can ask to turn off the audio recording by saying this is “off the record.” Your name will appear in my dissertation with your permission, but if prefer we can create a fictitious name for you to protect your identity.

They all agreed to use their own name and signed the permission consent form to have a digital audio recording. The participants were also aware that they would be approving the bio, transcript, and appreciative reflections and could make any changes they desired since their name was attached to the materials.

With media people, there is a reluctance to be videotaped and that is probably because they are more comfortable behind the scenes. They are also aware of the editing process and how things can be taken out of context. The audio recording allowed for less intrusion and moments of being self-conscious. To view the entire Permission Consent Form (**see Appendix**).

As an additional safeguard for use of names and identity, I sent an email to all of the participants informing them that the dissertation would be going out to my committee with the use of their approved names and to contact me if there were any issues. Given that they had said yes to so many materials with their name on it – this was just my way of giving them a heads up with at least three weeks notice since it was sent on August 10, 2012.



## **Pre-interview Conversations**

In November and December 2009, I started short pre-interview phone conversations as a way to touch base and get a read on critical issues most important to my freelance friends. I was pleasantly surprised that all had a variety of challenges and a few included: the love/hate of having a structure to wrap themselves around; social isolation; the willingness to accept anything; financial security; billing issues; money, getting and keeping it; scheduling multiple clients; and slow payments.

This gathering of challenges to help formulate questions happened before my immersion in appreciative inquiry. Now I would change the focus and ask, “what practices are working for you when it comes to freelance?” The lessons learned will be carried over to my next project.

## **Developing Questions for the Conversation**

These pre-interview conversations gave us time to reconnect but also were a foundation for formulating the questions and categories of the interview. Initially, I had a ridiculously large amount of questions and my adviser suggested refining to about 7-9.

These overall questions were sent in advance of the interviews in the summer 2010. Reading *Doing Interviews* (Kvale, 2007) was also an invaluable resource for providing a model for performative research (Kvale, 1996; Bava, 2005; Gehart, et al., 2007). The conversations were seen as a framework and there did not have to be any particular order and although similar questions were asked of all the participants – I individualized them for their own specialty line of work within media. The following questions for the dissertation follow:

1. Tell me about your career path and how it eventually led to starting your freelance work.
2. What are the factors (e.g. geography) that influence your work? How would you describe the influence of these factors on your work?
3. How has the nature of freelance work in your industry changed over the years? Is there a new type or style of freelance work emerging? How are the changes in technology, market etc. changing the nature of work/industry?
4. What are the challenges and rewards (social, emotional, financial, relational, work setting and relationships etc.) of doing freelance work?
5. It's talked about how freelancers are often continually shifting their identify/mindset. Will you discuss this phenomenon of constantly shifting to fit a potential employer or assignment, changing work culture, new collaborative partners etc?
6. Freelance work is often described as being adaptive, instinctive and relationship-focused. What do you think it takes?
7. How are age, creativity and experience valued in your industry?

8. Is your freelance work sustainable? What factors would grow your freelance practice? What are your plans for future work, projects or life changes?
9. What lessons learned could you offer to an up-and-coming (FILL IN PERTINENT JOB TITLE) when it comes to successfully navigating a freelancing career?

As a note: For each participant I used these broad-based questions but also had expanded conversational subset questions to ask on each of these topics, partially as backup in case the conversation lost steam.

I did not have to cover this subset questions but wrote it into an expanded conversational script. Often I did not follow the script but had the material there just in case. For instance, there were background notes as a way to introduce each participant.

My goal was to let the participant take the conversational lead and I followed as if it were a dance. That is one reason why all the interviews are so different even though they had a baseline of similar questions.

## **Collecting and Interpreting Materials**

### **Data Collection: The Conversations**

Based on the relational and dialogic perspective I approached the interviews as conversations. They were all arranged in advance through phone calls and emails. Since I was staying at a hotel for all the interviews, the participants were free to meet at my hotel or be in the comfort of their home. The goal was to have it in a place where they could unwind and be less distracted. If at all possible, we met beforehand for a meal to catch up on personal and enjoy ourselves. Though this was not part of the data collection, it helped with the conversation that constituted the “data” by helping us to reconnect and setting the stage for what was to come.

### **Time and Scheduling**

I tried to keep the conversations within the allotted two-hour time limit and be respectful of their busy schedules. The schedules were made in advance through email correspondence. The goal was to complete all the interviews in the summer, 2010.

### **Digital Recording**

When it came to capturing the audio, I am a firm believer in backup and had two sound recording options. Internally on my Mac, I was able to easily record and store conversations on Quicktime Pro and it requires minimal technical expertise. In addition, I had a very small unobtrusive digital recorder with an easy to carry collapsible microphone. Everything could easily be transported in a laptop case.

## The Analysis

The analysis included the following steps in sequence; 1) Transcripts 2) Coding and 3) Appreciative Reflections.

### The Transcripts

This was the most time-intensive part of the dissertation. As I write this methodology, I truly question why I did all the transcriptions myself. In terms of time and labor, it took almost a year from start to finish, which includes approval from all the participants.

Initially, I had grant money to visit the participants. The next time I will write additional funding into a budget for transcription. Lesson learned. I had a choice to either pay someone to transcribe or do it myself. I had an inflated notion of my skills as a fast keyboarder at 80 WPM. Well, transcribing also involves intense listening – and I had a total of eleven participants. I overestimated my skills sets here.

The good news is that I learned the material in a very intimate fashion by listening repeatedly to the conversations and often. This served as one of the early steps in analysis. The bad news is that it took longer than expected since I was working a full-time job teaching four classes a semester.

With long conversations about two-hours in length, I purchased a transcription program called Dragon Naturally Speaking but soon discovered it works better in a monologue than in dialogue. Eventually, I typed all the transcripts myself. I would consider getting a professional service to transcribe the conversations. Although each 30 - 50 page transcription took between 2 - 3 weeks, it also had to be approved. When I decided to add subheads and a table of contents, then there was another set of approval hoops to jump through. It adds up with eleven people.

Again, if I weren't seeking participant signoff on the work – the time would have been cut in half for the transcripts. However, the revisions allowed the participants' to feel confident attaching their names to the work so in the long run it was worthwhile. I am still scratching my head and thinking – no wonder I was so tired – the word "insane" comes to mind. Again, there are no take backs when it comes to the dissertation process.

### Tracking the Revisions and Submissions

The good news is that I kept track of all the revisions and submission on the first page from when the interview transpired to when I received the FINAL approved transcript. The subheads came about when initially transcribing – I would write a little headline and the page number to remember a special comment. For readability, I put in a table of contents and subheads to break up the 30-50 pages. This was a useful tool in terms of engaging the reader and later utilizing some of the subheads in the Appreciative Reflections and Chapters. This required a lot of logistical work for keeping track of eleven participants edits. All the final transcripts are available upon request.

## **Atlast.ti for Coding**

It was at the suggestion of my adviser, Dr. Saliha Bava, that I decided to attend the 2nd Annual Planning for *Qualitative Research: Design, Analysis and Software Integration* at Temple University where I took a basic course in Atlas.ti – a qualitative analysis coding program (January 13-15, 2011). My learning curve was slow since I had a Mac and had to utilize another computer since the program is only PC compatible.

Although hesitant at first, the ability to store and code data made it easier to sort through eleven manuscripts each 30-50 pages in length. I downloaded the manuscripts in rtf text format and then basically decided on appropriate categories. The categories were based on initial questions and reoccurring themes within the conversations (see *Creating the Codes*).

Atlas.ti made it easier and more efficient to access, store and insert manuscript text into the various codes. My initial thought was that I would have gone crazy if I had to use highlighters – or I would have adapted with a cut and paste approach which I fortunately did not have to attempt. The rewards of Atlas.ti for coding and containment far surpassed the learning curve and I would highly recommend utilizing a coding program for research. Although my skills are rudimentary, it was an extremely useful tool.

## **Creating the Codes**

I initially started with five major codes for freelancing that were derived from my broad-based conversational questions and areas of interests (Conversational Questions). These main areas of investigation included geography, psychology, sustainability, aging and creativity, and relationships as it applied to the freelance world. Then other sub-codes and commonalities materialized from the dialogue such as finding balance, freelancers hiring freelancers, negotiation, media education, future plans, and lessons learned emerged. The extra codes have the potential to be used as subcategories.

## **Appreciative Reflection Timeline**

With all the transcripts and bios approved by the end June 2011, I started working on the appreciative reflections for each participant. As stated earlier, the intention was to focus on the lessons learned and what was working for them. This information was extracted from Atlas.ti codes mentioned earlier and served as the foundation for starting the appreciative reflections. Carol's was the first one that I attempted in June 2011 to test if the approach worked and it did. My adviser would make comments and then I would correct and send back to my adviser.

On an average, they were 6-10 pages in length and each would take a minimum of 2-3 weeks to write, and then my adviser would approve and corrections would take place. We decided to send all of the corrected versions out around the same time to make our life less complicated with deadlines and tracking.

Carol's was the first one written in June 2011 and Sheryl's the last in February 2012. We then sent them off for approval at the same time in February 2012 and then the participants were free to revise. The reflections started coming back between February and June 2012.

## **Appreciative Reflection: A Creative Collage of Narrative Styles**

The participants were interviewed at the height of the recession (2010) and all were grumbling about compressed time and decreased wages. Given that many had decades of experience, I decided to write the narrative through a reflective lens that allowed me to frame their lives from an appreciative stance. In the appreciative reflection, in regard to their work histories, I did not deny the economic hardship of the recession but it was part of the backstory in their reflections since they had been successfully navigating this world for decades.

This appreciative reflection blended the relational story of how I knew these projects participants in the form of autoethnography along with their performative work history, while layering this collage with expert commentary in social construction, appreciative inquiry, and dialogic practices bridging many disciplines.

"Appreciative Reflection," a short 6-10-page takeaway on each 30-50-page conversation in the form of a transcript, was initially inspired by an interest in Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999, 2005) where the conversation shifts to what is working in an organization as opposed to a problem-focused discourse.

This repositioning has the capacity to generate change. Described in the book *Social Construction: A Reader – Appreciative Inquiry* is a "constructionist change practice . . . lodged in the assumption that when we begin to explore people's positive experiences within an organization, the conversations begin to change" (Gergen & Gergen, 2008, p. 160).

As a change practice for organizations, there are also adaptations designed for improving one's personal life (Kelm, 2005; Stavros & Torres, 2005). I created an appreciative reflection, as an analytical tool for each conversation. It is constructed to situate the participants within the story, provide some relational backstory, and highlight the critical lessons learned from their freelance journey. This positioning allowed me to construct the value buried within the layers of cynicism and disappointment as revealed in the freelancers' stories where they discuss navigating a harsh climate of compressed budgets, elusive work and intense competition. This reframing is an attempt to examine what's working. Perhaps a focus on their adaptive, innate survival instincts, or their importance of their relational connections, or a regime or spiritual practice that gives them perspective. What lessons or advice could be shared with individuals who are seeking similar work? How did it change my own attitude about working a full-time job or remembering past freelance experiences? This positive stance is not just spin and putting on a happy face but has value as "an antidote to cynicism and defeatism" (Anderson et al. 2008, p. 48).

Initially, my broad conversational questions were not done with an Appreciative Inquiry approach in mind. Many of my questions were open-ended, curious and I did not intentionally promote a positive framework. It was with listening and open-mindedness, even when challenged with contrary viewpoints, that allowed for an “appreciative exploration” to emerge. An expression used to describe a position of engaging in dialogue even when confronted with positions and “behavior that defies understanding” (Gergen, 2009, p. 168 – 170) and is further explored:

This is not a sneering search for the hidden foibles of their position, a gathering of ammunition for subsequent confrontation. Rather, the invitation is to explore the ways in which their positions are adequate to a tradition or form of life. In what sense do they make sense? Invited, then, are forms of appreciative exploration. (Gergen, 2009)

My stance of appreciative exploration allowed for individuals to candidly discuss their freelance journey without judgment, confrontation or censorship and this presented some unusual dialogue. A prime example is when my friend Ayad Rahim, a Blogger on the Middle East, described the events that led him to shift politically from the radical left to the far right. Ayad discussed the need to leave the “Arab tribe” because he felt at odds with Arabs who saw Saddam Hussein as Bismarck rather than as a butcher. Was this conversation solely about freelance work? Not really, but it was through listening and reflecting that allowed his story to surface as an appreciative construction of his context rather than my perspective of freelance. I discovered a rich discourse on the politics of the Middle East and America. As a friend, I could appreciate how he occupies a unique perch between America and the Middle East and how this needs to be cultivated in terms of his writing. It did not have to connect to my research topic but it did add perspective and value to a view of his own unique contribution and this idea may resurface in his future freelance work. It gave me an appreciation of one’s personal context as deeply intertwined to their professional identity. With conversations, the impact may not be clear until another time and remind us that dialogue is full of potential to emerge at a later date.

Sure, there were moments of disagreement and agreement in all the conversations – but throughout we were fully open and engaged. Even when the conversation meandered, I treated the situation like improvisational jazz moments described in *Yes to the Mess*:

Jazz players look for and notice instability, disorder, novelty, emergence, and self organization for their innovative potential rather than as something to be avoided, eliminated, or controlled. Indeed, jazz bands are very much human systems living at the edge of chaos. To understand their social complexity requires cultivating an aesthetic that values surrender and wonderment over certainty, appreciation over problem solving, listening and attunement over individual isolation. (Barrett, 2012, p. 68)

My willingness to not be confined and permission to explore allowed for dialogue that was real, personal and at times almost like a jazz riff that would take off in an unexpected and surprising direction. Rather than stopping the conversation and deciding what was on or off track, I welcomed these “jazzy” sidebar moments and could reflect on them later. For example, jimi izrael talked candidly about his fight with *Essence* magazine and his futile attempts to collect his money for a story. He also mentioned the angry women he

encountered on his book tour for *The Denzel Principle: Why Black Women Can't Find Good Black Men* (izrael, 2010). How could this be examined from an appreciative perspective? Perhaps, exploring the courage it takes to put your ideas out in the public and the willingness to take the heat.

The comfort zone of a having a long relational history and friendship with the participants coupled with knowing they could change anything afterwards or back away from the project (Participatory Consent Form), allowed for compelling and heartfelt dialogue about their freelance experience. This Appreciative Reflection furthers the research dialogue by bringing forth forms of life that is based on appreciative exploration. The Appreciative reflections, in alphabetical order, are available in chapter IV.

## The Macro Narrative

The macro narrative blended the voices of all the participants into four distinct interpretive chapters covering critical emergent freelance themes while weaving their stories along with threads of commentary from experts in social construction, psychology, sociology, urban studies, media, health, and communications and this intertwines complementary points of view to the topics discussed. The process of writing served as an analytical tool for sense making.

The first chapter, *The Liminal Freelance Landscape: Geography, Proximity, and Community*, examines the terrain of where the freelancer is emotionally and physically situated. The liminal landscape, which includes an overarching tensional uncertainty of being “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1967) as the freelancers find themselves foraging for work while working, is a significant part of the migrant creative experience. The freelancer’s networked community is also explored – whether global or local – and proximity to clients is a variable depending on the level of collaboration required. Therefore, the topography of freelance is more than just about land but where the freelancers’ find themselves in relationship to the geography, proximity, community and other influences that allow us to understand the social construction of interdependent enterprise (Florida, 2008, 2011; Gergen, 2009). This chapter was started December 2012 with many revisions and the last edit was in March, 2012 with a subsequent revision before submitting to committee.

Now that over one-third of the adult workforce is engaged in contract work according to the online Freelancers Union, the term “real job” is shifting and undergoing reconstruction. The Chapter, *This is a “Real Job,”* explores how the term “real job,” like the phrase “regular family,” will present many more work style configurations and has the potential to move us towards a more expansive discourse when it comes to employment (Burr, 1995; Gergen et al., 2009). A common theme for many of the project participants is that many remember the voices of anxious family members asking, “when are you going to get a real or regular job?” The freelancers still hear internal voices or “social ghosts” (Gergen et al., 2009) that speak to the concern that they will have a diminished life without the benefits of a steady paycheck, pension, stock, options and healthcare. With the rest of the workforce suffering from the subprime meltdown, there is no going back and now we look to the improvisational flexibility of the freelancer for guidance as they discuss the challenges, adaptations and rewards of working in a precarious and constantly shifting industry (Neff,

2007; Gill as cited at Deuze, 2011). This chapter submitted in March 2012 with edits from adviser in June and revision planned before submission.

*A Conversation About Negotiation and Sustainability* demonstrates the ongoing, continuous process of freelance engagement through mutual coordination (Gergen et al., 2009); the conversational trinity of listening, hearing, and speaking (Anderson & Gehart, 2007); appreciative capacity building (Dixon & Adamson, 2011; Bisen, 2011); engaging discovery (Holman, 2010) and cultivating appreciative moments (Whitney et al., 2005) that moves the conversation from “working for” to “working with.” The workforce of the future requires not only relational engagement but also a commitment to physical, emotional, mental and spiritual revitalization to create new possibilities (Schwartz, 2012; McNamee, 2005). This chapter submitted in April 2012 with subsequent revisions by adviser the last being in July 2012. Intended corrections before submitting to committee.

*The Generative Years: Living What’s Next* reveal the improvisational skills needed to creatively thrive but also demonstrates how these project participants are becoming new role models for “positive aging” (Gergen & Gergen, 2001, 2010) along with presenting enhanced possibilities for productivity and creativity later in life (Cohen, 2005, 2006; Small, 2008). The majority of participants involved with this project have a substantive freelance work history and through my literature review (see Literature Review) did not find narratives of media freelancers in the U.S. who were so public, candid and forthright about the rewards, challenges, and adaptations of working in a youth-fixated industry. This polyphonic collection of eleven freelancers’ work biographies, the majority between the ages of 40 – 60+, provide a substantial work history fueled by talent, drive and improvisational skills. This bonus of discovering another great story emerge through the dissertation process, one of aging and creativity in a pro-youth industry, offers a substantial wealth of material given that more Boomers are remaining in the workforce (Salkowitz, 2008).

The overall chapters weave the participants’ personal reflections while painting a composite multimedia portrait of freelance enterprise including geography, creativity and aging, negotiation, improvisation, and the generative, appreciative practices that bring life to work.



## IV. Appreciative Reflections

***“The biggest obstacles involve your own mind because you will be criticized constantly because the freelancer is the easiest person to throw under the bus. When there’s a bad situation – when somebody has made a bad decision – and when causes and conditions are such the things don’t go the way the client hoped – the freelancer – and it’s almost always the producer and not the director – that will get thrown under the bus.”***

***“That’s where your Buddhist practice helps you to separate and see what’s essential. I used to feel little sympathy for clients. I thought they should educate themselves to the process, spend more time with it and stop being neurotic. I’m like buck up and take some responsibility. I realize that people on the client side of corporate production have a whole lot of other responsibilities. They can’t be production professionals and that’s why they hire you. You’ve got to educate them to the process and that requires a whole lot of patience getting their attention. Explaining to them why you can’t cut these two crewmembers off the list in an effort to pinch pennies. You have to feel for their position. They’re usually running scared from their bosses. That’s another reason to be a freelancer because you’re the boss.”***

***Carol Beck, Videographer***

**Carol E. Beck – Videographer**



# Carol E. Beck

## Appreciative Reflection – Videographer

After not seeing each other for six years, the interview with Carol was long overdue and a wonderful excuse to hang in Atlanta at her condo for a day and talk. We're longtime graduate film school friends from Ohio University and have known each other for 20+ years. Her peaceful, modest two-bedroom condo is an extension of a very down-to-earth attitude and comfort at being in the world. Everything is organized and has a place – even her closets are neat.

### Learn the Culture

This same attention to detail is evident in her production work. Carol is a self-described problem solver. The good news is that her low-key attitude is balanced with a wicked sense of humor and a stealth take-charge demeanor that is reassuring, always respectful and not domineering. She's a rock. With her video work, she travels worldwide from India to Siberia. Her attention to cultural nuances is one of her strengths especially when it comes to international production. Carol feels strongly about learning the culture and notes, *"I just ask and say to clients – 'tell me about your corporate culture.' When you are working internationally, you have to educate yourself about customs, dress and corporate culture. I got in a fight where I was working in India for a corporate client and it was 108 degrees and we were working in rural areas. The guys wanted to wear shorts. I said absolutely not. Men here wear shorts at the beach. They do not wear shorts in public where they are working. You will wear long pants and I can't wear sleeveless things because this is rural, conservative India. You show some respect and say your ways are important to me."*

The term "mutual coordination" emphasizes that boundaries are not only bridged when communicators try to understand the actions of the other – but also when they coordinate their actions with the other (Gergen, Shrader & Gergen, 2009 p. 247). "Mutual Coordination" is critical when working on international crews or with individuals having different viewpoints. It is the little things that make a huge difference. The simple act of asking an employer about their culture and then the respectful follow through is amazingly generative and affirming. Carol's focus is always on what the client wants. Regardless of working as a freelancer, adapting to the culture is essential if you are to succeed. Being creative and getting the work done is not enough, you need to be a good fit.

### Siberia Is Not A Metaphor

Carol's start to her career was a bit rocky. She states, *"I have a Master's degree in Fine Arts which is a terminal degree. When I finished graduate school – I decided that I wanted to be an independent filmmaker and also have an academic career. I kept looking for a*

*'real position' and landed a tenure-track position at Keene State College in New Hampshire where I taught for seven years before becoming a tenure casualty. I was 24-years-old when I took my tenure-track position. So my academic career was essentially over at 33. I did it backwards. The summer before my last year at Keene and the summer after – I spent it in Siberia working on an independent film project."*

*When she came back from Siberia, "I was unemployed and I had no savings since I had been spending every penny paying back my student loan. No job and no place to go. I decided to come to Atlanta because I had an old friend from high school who was there. I tried to find work. It became absolutely clear that I was overqualified for anything that was an interim job-job. No one in the industry could extrapolate my experience as it applied to doing production work in the quote unquote 'real world.'"*

*Carol was finally hired by a woman who ran a small production company "at a wage that was less than what I made as an adjunct faculty member my first year out of college – so this is ten years later. So I essentially decided to look at it as a paid internship so I could figure out how production worked in Atlanta."*

*She notes that the woman had absolutely no management skills and was not a good director. Carol says, "She let me go because she felt like I wasn't a good fit anymore." Carol adds, "She wanted someone she could boss around and I wasn't that person." Her freelance career started when a friend she met at this small production company started finding her production coordinator positions in 1996. Carol acknowledges that it was a huge growth period and says, "There was a lot of corporate work and that was primarily what I was doing – corporate video."*

## **Mercedes Benz Accelerated My Career**

*"My first jobs were totally on the behest of my friend Sara. Then once I started making relationships with directors and clients – then it became word-of-mouth. I sort of made my reputation on the basis of this large ten-month long job I did for the marketing launch of the Mercedes Benz "M" class which was being built in Alabama. It was a big deal.. It was the first time they launched a vehicle outside of Europe. I got the job because I was hired as a production coordinator on a big job where the producer completely dropped the ball and I did a big production save. There were a lot of producers in town that were vying for this Mercedes job and thought they had it in the bag. Nobody was more shocked than me when I was offered the job. That was my first big producing gig and it was huge, mammoth and with lots of moving parts. I'm still very proud of that work."*

*This is where Carol developed a reputation for successful large-scale launches, marketing events, global meetings and installations. As Carol notes, "You've got beautiful clips to show people along with demo stuff. People talk. It gets around." This brings additional production work and Carol adds, "I did the world's largest plasma wall for Panasonic – which was made up of forty 60" plasmas. I was working with Japanese engineers. I had to figure out how to make one image that would fill up all those screens at a resolution that would work. The Japanese had to figure out how to do all the programming that would break the image back up and program it in to all those monitors." The intricacies of large-scale production require exceptional teamwork, leadership and relational skills. As Carol comments, "once your name gets out there in that community, the news travels fast."*

Carol is very diversified in terms of her work and interests. She says, *“Along with event production work, I’ve been working on TV spots and some documentary-style work. I also do pro bono work. My great love is still documentary work.”*

## **All Things Tibetan: The Compassionate Freelancer**

Carol has been happily engaged with her Buddhist practices for years and it is seamlessly woven into her life and informs her work experience. She just returned from documenting the Tibetan community in exile in Dharamsala, India and is involved with the Emory-Tibet Partnership, which is collaboration between Emory University and several Tibetan institutions. The Emory-Tibet Partnership includes a science initiative that is a five-year science curriculum for selected monastics from seventeen institutions. The long-term goal is to integrate western science into traditional Tibetan monastic education. With this program, she is documenting Tibetan practices and spending time with monks, scientists, and students. Carol easily moves between spiritual and professional worlds with ease.

Her ability to handle a high-stress freelance production job with major corporate clients (Mercedes Benz, Coca-Cola Company, Honda, General Electric, Proctor and Gamble, and others) involves massive coordination and discipline. She mentions in our conversation the vulnerability of the freelancer, *“the biggest obstacles involve your own mind because you will be criticized constantly because the freelancer is the easiest person to throw under the bus. When there’s a bad situation – when somebody has made a bad decision – and when causes and conditions are such the things don’t go the way the client hoped – the freelancer – and it’s almost always the producer and not the director – that will get thrown under the bus.”*

Our conversation addressed the reasons why *“getting thrown under the bus”* happens more often to female producers and segues into how she became a compassionate freelancer. *“That’s where your Buddhist practice helps you to separate and see what’s essential. I used to feel little sympathy for clients. I thought they should educate themselves to the process, spend more time with it and stop being neurotic. I’m like buck up and take some responsibility. I realize that people on the client side of corporate production have a whole lot of other responsibilities. They can’t be production professionals and that’s why they hire you. You’ve got to educate them to the process and that requires a whole lot of patience getting their attention. Explaining to them why you can’t cut these two crewmembers off the list in an effort to pinch pennies. You have to feel for their position. They’re usually running scared from their bosses.”* She interjects, *“that’s another reason to be a freelancer because you’re the boss.”*

Carol understands the importance of bringing her Buddhist practice to work, *“it’s staying calm; practicing my patience with others; trying to understand their needs; and doing whatever you can to realize their needs. When it’s irrational, you can’t get angry. You have to walk them through the logic.”* She comments that micromanagement is the thing that creates stress and kills projects. Carol has the standard stories about difficult clients but frames our conversation with common sense approaches for dealing with challenges.

She tells the story of a so-called “The Dragon Lady” that everyone feared at this one company. Carol recognized that this woman only wanted to be kept in the loop because that’s her job. *“She’s a brand marketing person. They are notoriously persnickety because guess what – it’s their job to protect the brand. They’re strategists and the brand police*

*will come smack you if you do something outside their guidelines. Well, I figured that out in no time that all she wanted was for people to not pull shit over on her. She wanted to be in the informational loop and know what was going on. At five o'clock every day, I would send her a little email letting her know what went on for the day. She adored me.*

*About a year later, I was working for a different production company on a job and it was the same large corporation that shall remain nameless. 'They're like this client was so difficult.' I didn't say anything. They said you have to real careful around her. I walk into the meeting. She looks up from her desk, sees me and runs over, hugs me and says, 'I'm so glad you're on the job.' It was just figuring out that the one thing that this person needed and it was not to be kept in the dark. Which a lot of time creative directors don't want people to know too much because they don't want them to change their idea. My attitude is that it's their video—not my video."*

Chris Bilton, director of the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom, attributes the often confrontational management and creative divide to a compartmentalized educational system with separated disciplines. He suggests a restructuring of the creative industries to foster "creatives who can manage and managers who can be creative" (Bilton, 2011, p. 39). Carol, possessing both management and creative expertise, is able to bridge corporate and crew negotiations with greater ease.

## **Your Value In The Workplace is Relational**

What makes someone valuable in the workplace transcends professionalism and meeting deadlines. It is about the ability to create a space for meaningful, relational dialogue that is absolutely essential to collaboration. Often we do not have the skills to change the conversation from accusatory to exploratory. When engaged in a work conflict, we often don't think of asking a simple question such as, "*What kind of improvements would you like to see from me?*" With a simple reframing, there is the possibility of learning something about our perceived demeanor and continuing the conversation in a more meaningful fashion described by Gergen as "relational valuing." In *Relational Being*, Ken Gergen demonstrates how a growth-oriented conversation thrives when we ask relationship-centered questions such as, "What is it about our relationship that is valuable, that gives it life, that brings forth our best work? What do we see as an ideal for our relationship, and how might we more fully achieve this ideal?" (Gergen, 2009, p. 342).

Carol respectfully invites input from management and coworkers – and then she makes an informed decision after listening to relevant partners. It is when individuals consciously create a space for collaborative dialogue that the discourse changes from "me" to "we" -- and that is when real "conversational partnership" begins (S. Bava, 2005).

## **What Can I Do For You?**

After sitting with Carol for a day, I took her "*what can I do for you?*" approach to heart. She states, "*'what can I do for you?' has to be freelancer's attitude in regard to the end client, the immediate client, the crew people, and the actors. That's where the Tibetan Buddhist perspective of putting others before yourself becomes very useful. When people know the job will come in on time, on budget, and they will not have to stress.'*"

Carol is an interesting mix of pragmatic, professional and personal. She is the freelancer's

friend, *"My crew knows you just come to me and just ask for what they need. I either squeeze some money out of the budget to give that extra piece of gear they need or try to find a solution or I take it up with the client for them. I'm their advocate. People want to be listened to and respected."* Carol is not only gracious with her clients but also extends the same "listening" courtesy to her freelance crew. In an effort to get the freelance job done, the act of listening is often eclipsed by expediency. Carol realizes that engagement with clients and crew is essential and this contributes to her success. Harlene Anderson, a therapist, discusses how "responsive-active listening-hearing" is not a passive act. "This listening posture and manner involves showing respect for, having humility toward, and believing that what a client has to say is worth hearing. It involves attending considerably, showing that we value a client's knowledge about his or her pain, misery, or dilemma" (H. Anderson, 2007).

### **Remember It's Work For Hire – Not Art**

Carol's respectful manner is balanced with the reality that she works for others. It is essential to remember that you are working for someone else and your needs are secondary. As she says, *"Remember it's work for hire – not art. You have to have a firm grasp of your own self-identity. You can't be needy and seeking approval. You cannot take criticism personally. You have to be willing to let go of things. You can't be a micromanager. It will eat you alive and destroy your career. If you can't separate yourself from your work, you will fail."*

Her grasp that this is a business is a healthy perspective. *"Your clients are not going to tell you how great you are. If you get a thank you at the end of a project, it's a big day. You can't confuse work for hire with art. If I want to make art, it's on my own time. They get to make decisions. You can make recommendations, guide them, educate them – but ultimately their video, their money, and their consequence. If it's a bad video, it's their decision. . ."*

### **Successful At Creating An Optimal Performance Space**

Carol is pragmatic and not a saint by any stretch of the imagination. There's an honesty that's refreshing in an age of consensus building. When she's on the set, there's no doubt that she's in charge. *"If someone brings me on and gets to know me – then they'll hire me again. I wouldn't do very well at cold calling because I'm not this 35-year old hottie. People, especially women, have a tendency to hire more on looks and personality than they do on experience and ability. It's true. Every ad agency is filled with young, good-looking women who may or may not be very good at what they do. It's to create a certain perception. A lot of production event companies are like that. Once they know me and see the work I do, they come back for seconds."*

What Carol provides, as a producer, is not based on the superficiality of looks or coolness and extends beyond competency. Carol comments on her perceived value, *"My reputation with crew people is that Carol maintains a calm set, a safe set, and a sane set. Nobody gets to raise their voice. Nobody is put in physical harm. You wouldn't believe what people ask crews to do at times. They're fed healthy meals on time. You don't just get a slab of pizza thrown at you. You respect them and their expertise. The best lesson I ever learned about producing was from the executive producer on the Mercedes's job. A good producer hires the best people for the job – delegates – and gets out of their way."* Carol

creates an optimal relational performance space where people can operate collaboratively, efficiently, and creatively with minimal interference (Bava, 2005).

## **Understanding Technology Informs Her Decisions**

Our conversation is an essential read for understanding the role of a good producer – and even more so for a female producer. She attributes her longevity as a freelance producer to having an understanding of technology and this helps to inform her budget decisions. Carol affirms, *“A lot of female producers are notoriously ignorant of the technical side and this infuriates directors and crews. They are good at the management side and client handholding. Because they don’t have a firm grasp of the technical, it makes it impossible to schedule, budget accurately or crew appropriately. Because I have a technical background – a MFA in film – which is pretty unusual for a producer in my business. That really helps me on those accounts. So not having a technical background is the downside for a lot of female producers.”*

As a media educator and former freelancer, Carol is right on target when it comes to addressing that her livelihood is linked to being technically savvy. It is inescapable and not even an add-on bonus at this point in time. If you’re not technically competent, you are left behind. Mark Deuze, editor of *Managing Media Work*, sums up our immersion in media as *“living a life not with but rather in media”* (Deuze, 2011). The freelancer is expected to be fluent with new technologies and there is no on-the-job training. Gina Neff writes in *The Lure of Risk*, *“ . . .this means that employees are expected, in the words of one programmer, to ‘hit the ground running’ with continually updated skills, including new programming language and familiarity with new technologies”* (Neff, p. 42).

## **Takeaway: Staying Strong; The Importance of a Spiritual Practice**

*“The hardest thing about freelance is finding time in the day to be good to yourself – to exercise, to meditate, to make healthy meals – to do those things you need to maintain balance,”* acknowledges Carol. She does have a personal trainer but that is not indulgent. This is a high-energy business and requires a tremendous amount of physical effort to go out and secure your work – then do your work.

Carol stresses, *“It’s a hustle. It’s an absolute necessity. If I don’t meditate and exercise, I get strung out. If you’re eating crap food you feel sluggish and awful. I have very few indulgences in my life. One is a personal trainer that I see a couple of times a week – because she is the thin blue line between diabetes and me because of my genetics. The other is I have a housekeeper come in once a month and do a thorough scrub down. Until I had the housekeeper, there were so many things I could never get to and I was working all the time.”*

There is inherent anxiety not knowing where your next job is coming from and Carol shares her philosophy for staying sane, *“The Buddhist pandita Shantideva, ‘if there’s something to do be done about it, why worry? If there’s nothing to be done with it why worry?’ If you need to get out there and hustle some contacts – then hustle some contacts. If you’ve hustled everybody you know to hustle – then you need to chill.”* Her Buddhist practice is very much in line with a social constructionist view of relational interdependence and co-action as espoused by Kenneth Gergen in *Relational Being*:

Over time one becomes conscious (Bhodii) that there are no independent objects or



events in the world. There are all human constructions. When we suspend the construction, as in meditation, we enter a consciousness of the whole or a unity. More formally, one enters consciousness of what Buddhists call *codependent origination*, or a sense of pure relatedness to all. Nothing we recognize as separate exists independent of all else. As the Vietnamese master Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, we come to an appreciation of *inter-being*, that ‘everything is in everything else.’ . . . “If I am in you, and you within me, then mutual caring should replace antagonism. (Gergen, 2009, p. 386)

This philosophy of relational interdependence allows for a kindness and compassion to emerge when it comes to coworkers, clients, and even toward self. Carol is able to handle the uncertainty of freelance by incorporating consistent spiritual and healing practices into her life.

### **The Takeaway: Respect**

Carol and Aretha have it right – “respect – just a little bit.” The successful freelancer is willing to subvert their ego and that is what I learned from Carol. She passionately adds, *“If you’re skilled at what you do and you are giving it your best effort, people want to be respected for that – for what they know, what they do. The care and want it to be done well. When people disrespect freelancers, it’s really galling because people chose to be on your project because 99 times out of 100, they are giving it their best shot. They may have challenges that you don’t understand and you’ve got to listen to them. My crew knows you just come to me and just ask for what they need. I’m their advocate. People want to be listened to and respected.”*

Media makers would be interested in how Carol negotiates her rates, deals with compressed budgets and the client’s fixation on the “Flip.” She also addresses how to get your first job, variances with international crews, and diversification for self-preservation in the following chapters.

### **Carol’s Postscript**

Since our face-to-face conversation a year ago, she mentions in a recent phone call that she recently returned from Washington, D.C. where she was videotaping a private meeting between about thirty people and the Dalai Lama held during an event with 10,000 Buddhists.

We discussed how our initial conversation impacted her life. She comments, *“My career was being taken seriously. People with ‘real jobs’ don’t respect or understand the difficulty. They think, ‘you’re so flexible’ – they don’t get it. They can relate to what a doctor does, but a freelancer’s work is mysterious and often taken less seriously.”*

Since April, she has had a minimal amount of work and acknowledges that summer is a notoriously slow time. Without concrete dates on the calendar, she started a Blog to feel less discouraged about humanity. Her new Blog *Growing Orbits* -- *“It is dedicated to sharing my encounters with seemingly ordinary people, places, and events all over the world that have had an extraordinary effect on me.”* Click on the following link to access her

*Growing Orbits* site ([www.carol-beck.com/growing/sample-page](http://www.carol-beck.com/growing/sample-page)). Carol affirms the Blog's positive effect, "*When you see your interdependence, you know you'll survive.*" Her Buddhist stance acknowledges that it is our relational connectedness, which is generative and can mitigate work-related setbacks.

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**Bill Cavanaugh - Audio Post Production Mixer, Composer, and Sound Designer**



# Bill Cavanaugh

## Appreciative Reflection – Audio Recording Engineer

I've known Bill Cavanaugh for almost thirty years when he was a student studying musical composition at the Cleveland Institute of Music. He turned me on to the music of Mahler and humored me by listening to my off-key backup rendition of *Midnight Train to Georgia* (Gladys Knight and the Pips) and anything Aretha while driving in the car. He encouraged me by saying, "*there's an art to singing backup*" and under his breath was probably whispering, "*and you don't have it.*" I remember a hot summer night when we were sitting outside and he started conducting the sounds in nature – from crickets to car backup noises. In that instant, my concept of a symphony was forever changed.

### The Cross-talking, Relational Brain

Bill lives in synesthetic moments-- dreaming in sounds and seeing colors with geometric patterns when intensely focused on music. I recently found a drawing of a sound wave he diagrammed to show the visual representation of amplitude. Coincidentally, Bill mixed the sound for the Nova *Synesthesia* segment that is linked in the next paragraph. He works on countless sound mixing projects for Nova, The History Channel, Discovery, Sesame Street, MTV and VHI along with a many other clients.

In the Nova segment, neuroscientist David Eagleman using magnetic brain imaging had synesthetes watch a black and white version of *Sesame Street* program featuring lots of moving numbers and letters, while simultaneously scanning their brains. The visual display showed cross-talk between two adjacent but unrelated areas of the brain, and this suggested that activity in one area stimulates another region. This crossover allows the synesthete to blend unrelated senses such as color and sound thus creating a different kind of internal conversation. The following underlined link connects you to the February 2011 Nova *Synesthesia: How Does The Brain Work?* segment ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdXMQoU\\_AeQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdXMQoU_AeQ)). Eagleman, a presentational speaker at the PopTech 2010 Conference suggested, "what we know is vastly outstripped by what we don't know" and discussed the importance of being open to the possibility of uncertainty while holding multiple hypotheses. He is essentially espousing a social constructionist viewpoint that encourages multiple realities to intersect and this promotes the kind of cross-talk that invigorates creative exchange.

### A Cross-disciplinary Education Is Essential

Bill who has been sound mixing through his independent company, RazorMix, for nationally and internationally recognized studios, production houses, and museums exemplifies the social constructionist spirit of creative engagement across multiple disciplines. Even in a

youth-fixated industry, he manages to secure name-brand clients such as MTV and VH1 because he is not only technically astute and musically gifted – but possesses a zealous curiosity about how the world works and has an overabundance of enthusiasm for the creative and relational process.

When I asked Bill what advice would you give an up-and-coming recording engineer on how to navigate freelance he said, *“I don’t consider myself only a recording engineer. My recommendation to anyone coming up is that your education should not only be technical but also heavy on content and cross-disciplined. If you live in a specialized technical education box like a recording engineer it’s not enough. You won’t be able to understand billing -- business concepts – how things fit in the world – how cash flow works – financials – sales. . . .”* Bill stressed the need to understand human beings and notes, *“that comes with experience. . .I’m not condemning youth. I’m just saying the schools are narrowly educating people under job training lines and not within the classical liberal arts education. I happened to have good people in college who taught me and said you can never understand Beethoven without understanding the politics, economics of his time. Knowing the history of where it came from in terms of the technical and understanding enough when it comes to other subjects that relate will help you to run a business as a freelancer – and it’s through helping clients understand choices such as ‘I want classical jazz.’ My music teacher said, ‘you cannot understand anything unless you understand the entire context around a piece of music.’ So when I was studying master classes, I was given the ‘Rite of Spring’ by Stravinsky to analyze. Stravinsky was using four-dimensional art and trying to create pictures – at the same time Picasso was trying to show in a two-dimensional painting that there was a four-dimensional aspect. At the same time, Einstein was out there with space-time. They were all hanging around together in Paris talking about this idea that space and time were the same thing. They were all cross-disciplined and that’s what we’re not doing now. Everything is specialized, technical education. It seems college has become more about job training than education. They’re picking up skills and information – but they’re not gaining knowledge.”*

“The problem of isolated disciplines has long been recognized, and the most common and conservative response is to require a broad or liberal education” (Gergen, 2009. P.214). While reflecting on a cross-disciplinary education, I consider the current state of media education as a misplaced job placement program. I no longer advise students to consider a standalone media major and instead suggest taking courses in tandem with other areas of interest (e.g. marketing, psychology, anthropology, science, business, etc.) in order to expand and bridge their talents. The technology makes it easy to create new media – and relatively harder to have something worth saying or sharing.

## **Over-the-horizon Radar**

Bill intuitively mixes sound the way a great chef throws unusual ingredients together in the kitchen and somehow it works. He remains humble even though he has collaborated with many Grammy, Clio, Webby, and Addy recipients while also receiving numerous creative awards and accolades. He brings an interdisciplinary approach to studio mixing along with a strong intellectual foundation in music, history, economics, constitutional law and politics.

With an intuitive and mostly self-taught adeptness when it comes to learning and implementing new technology, Bill was one of the early studio engineers to use the Fairlight

digital sampling synthesizer, which at the time cost around a half-million-dollars. Also, one of the first in the industry to recognize that recording studios were shifting from centralization (i.e. Los Angeles, New York, Miami, and Chicago) – to multiplexing -- and to eventually collapsing, Bill was malleable enough with his technology. Having “over-the-horizon” radar to adapt to the changes he developed a pioneering and enhanced multi-track Apple system for recording portability almost ten years ago.

Bill comments, *“the over-the-horizon radar is part of the instinctual mechanism that a freelancer must have. Guys like Edison who were very strong instinctual people believed it was 99 percent perspiration and one percent inspiration. They worked from ideas. ‘I can take this electromagnetic current idea and can replace candle making – and created the light bulb.’ How did he put that together?”* Bill’s advice, “work hard, work long and gain experience. Look to the experience and learn from the experience.”

### **Best Advice: Don’t Build a Studio**

The best business decision Bill ever made was to “not” build a studio. An entrepreneurial friend advised, *“you’re not really a businessman. You’re an artist and you’re going to fail if you do that -- you won’t have the energy to do what you do and run a business. There are plenty of studios in town. What you should do is take the work and go rent.”*

### **Created a New Business Model for Mixing**

Bill agrees that it was great advice to rent space especially given the situation now with studios shutting down because of high overhead. As Bill explains, it was a turning point for developing a new relationship with studios and encouraging him to be interdependently situated within an established studio as a vendor. Bill notes, *“It was my first company where I was doing the equivalent of freelance and putting it through a business account instead of taking it on personally.”*

He constructed a new approach to work and is now blazing an alternative trail for other studio mixers to consider. Cavanaugh notes, *“I got a job offer in Manhattan from Sync Sound doing big projects. That’s where I worked on ‘Beavis and Butthead,’ picked up MTV as a client at that point. And they followed me wherever – several other companies did – and I moved on to two or three other studios. The last one I worked for was a company called Highball Digital (not real name) and they were part of a large editorial company that was running into the larger problem of increasing rents and lower budgets. They had hundreds of million dollars of equipment installed in this facility. Their overhead got to the point where they were left with either cutting salaries or laying people off. I was making \$150,000 a year. They then had me down to \$120,000 and then the cut it down to \$100,000. I said, ‘that I would start taking in some outside jobs to make up for it because New York is expensive.’ Then one day out of the blue owner/manager of the audio division said, ‘look we’re in trouble.’ I found out years later that the company never really made money. They said, ‘your new salary is \$87,000’ and half the staff walked out. I said let me think about it?”*

### **Opening To Possibility**

I love the phrase, “let me think about it. . .” It is the pause in the conversation that creates a space for another possibility to be considered. Often there is a discomfort with pauses. It is respectful way to politely be excused and continue the conversation at a later date when

you have something to discuss – a placeholder for future dialogue. Or, it is a conflict-free way to ignore someone. I've observed plenty of parents of young children use the phrase "let me think about it" (myself included) to pause the conversation. In Bill's case, he was actively listening, engaging, and using the time out to ponder the possibilities.

Bill was then able to come back with an offer that was mutually agreeable. *"I thought – I have A & E Biography, The History Channel as clients who have left the studio system because the new technology was allowing them to do some of the work. The studio was losing clients because they could not longer afford to pay for the rooms as their budgets were failing. I looked at the technology and built a small multitrack system that could literally be portable with a laptop, control surface, hard discs, and a second monitor. . .in the early 2000s.*

## **Making Tracks**

I asked him if the technology was there earlier? Bill notes, *"It was there but it had to be done on a physically big system – the editing software had to feed into a big mixing console. At that point, the company Digidesign, which is now owned by Avid – which is a huge hardware and software company that – came out with this small controller interface which would talk directly to the audio software and give you monitoring options. I looked at that and I was able to get 32 tracks of audio running and I started mixing. I went back to these clients – I was mixing 'Biography' at the time, 'Today in History' for the History Channel and a bunch of other projects. I said I have this system and I'd like to demo it for you – and you don't have to go into the studio – and I can give you a really good rates. Eventually, I convinced all these clients to do it. I said I'd work on a flat rate basis. I still had my job at the studio. I went back to the owner after I got a commitment from these people and said I will stay with you. But I will stay if I can work with these outside clients as a freelancer; these ex-clients are never coming to your studio ever again. I mentioned again that I'm not competition. I want to work with the studio. I've just incorporated. I want you to treat me as a vendor rather than an employee – and you can pay me your \$87,000. You pay me everything I cost, e.g. healthcare, and other company costs to employ me – and it came up to about \$120,000. I was now a vendor. I still wanted the equivalent of time off from the studio and vacation with pay."*

## **Highball On The Rocks**

He got a great deal and as Bill would say, *"I offered them no option because nobody knew how to run the facility at that point. I was chief engineer at the time. I knew how this place worked and nobody else really did – and you're not going to get anyone else in here. I hard balled them and they went along with it – and that lasted for about two years until they went under. And when they went under, I picked up as many clients as I could and have gone forward as RazorMix Incorporated. That's been seven years now. So in-between all those jobs I've been doing freelance work. It was always with the intent that this will hold me over until I get a job."*

## **The Incredible Shrinking Studio**

Cavanaugh is a font of information regarding the history of the recording industry. *"In 2005, I recognized that the industry was beginning to collapse. I had seen in the 1980s with the music studios when MIDI came out. That was a technical communication protocol that eventually allowed people to record music at home. Artists were thinking if I spend*

*100,000 on MIDI equipment in my home – I could create five albums for that money as opposed to taking money from a record label and wait to pay that off before my first royalty check. So the studios lost the business and I saw that. Then I moved from mixing music into mixing audio post in the 1980s and I saw the same MIDI-like thing happening again to audio post in the early 2000's."*

I asked about the status of studios and Bill says, *"They're shrinking or subdividing. For instance, in New York City it is down to two or three rooms where you can record a Broadway cast. The other studios went out of business or they took those big rooms and subdivided into three rooms and charge a third of the rate."* It is reminiscent of cinema multiplexing. Bill agrees, *"That's exactly it. They have to keep all of those rooms working in multiple shifts and yet they can't get enough work because they're charging too much per hour. You can call it bottom feeding or what you want. I'm just going there and picking it off and I'm not playing by the old rules. I'm making new ones up. It's like the old armies. They'd point their guns at one another and fire. I'm one of those guys that hides in the trees and shoots the general."* Cavanaugh is armed with flexible system he created that allows him to be highly competitive, creative and actively engaged with his work.

### **Invention, Adaptation And Affirmation**

Bill's Invention of a portable sound mixing system was clearly a way to get ahead of a collapsing industry and he had the foresight to see it coming early. *"I thought, I'm going to get on the front side of the curve and use the technology this time rather than letting it overrun me. I was a little early to market and clients were still in the mindset of I really want to be in a studio but we can't afford it. They treated it like a bargain basement kind of thing and said you can't really charge us if you're not in a studio. I said, 'no – you're getting the same mixer, the same mix, the same software, you're getting everything except you're not doing to pay \$16,000 for a show – you are going to pay \$4,000. All of a sudden I'm working the same show on a desktop system instead of a studio – a show like 'Biography.' At that point they had worked the studios down to editing, mixing, building the whole thing and recording the talent for less and less. If I was going to record the talent – I'd go rent a studio, record the talent – bring the file back and then do the mix in my home. When the mix was ready to go – let's say an A & E program, I would go to the A & E headquarters — and we would do a final review of the mix."*

The positive affirmation for Bill is that he's working when most studio engineers are suffering. To this day, he was a forerunner and one of the first to create a system that is portable, affordable, and created a whole new business model for mixing. He comments, *"I was told I was the first one in New York to do it. Even the designers of the equipment AVID – the designers of ProTools – have been pushing me for five years to do an article on it – how I used their technology. How I changed the working model. Well, I said, 'I still have too many friends making a living and if I let the cat out of the bag. It could completely collapse the studio system."*

### **The Old Studio Model is Not Sustainable**

As Bill describes, the studio system was collapsing on its own. His contribution is to show people how to be more portable. When asked if he is selling this system to other composers he replied, *"I built two systems for two of my assistants – two guys that I taught how to do the job of post. They said, 'we want to be doing what you're doing.' Most*



*people are like don't tell them – don't show them how it works.' I think putting a few people out there will validate the market and be more beneficial to me than if I try and hold it inside. I taught them the whole business model and they call themselves my clones."*

## **The New Model is More Flexible**

Bill suggests that the new model is about portability due to technology and pricing. He says, *"a lot of what I had to do is go to the networks and they'd say 'we don't have an audio budget.' They would try and mix the show inside the video system and it would never pass the technical evaluations. It would get kicked back and they'd say it's illegal here because video editors don't know how to do audio – any more than I know how to do video. I can do video but I would not be great at it. The joke was always do you want a plumber to do your taxes? You don't. So if you can get the same guy you had in a studio and get it delivered for a third of what you were paying. Would you go for it? Again they'd say, 'well, we don't have an audio budget.' I'd say you do have an audio budget. You're just using it on a video system and tying up that video system for a week to do the audio. I can do it in a day and that video system can move on to the next video project. That's why you're behind on everything. Let me inject my company into the system and I will get it done in a day or two days – and it will pass tech evaluation and it won't be bounced back over and over. And you won't spread it over a month. It will be a job that gets done in a few days – goes to evaluation – and you get a paper back saying you passed. They went for it."*

Bill's business developed because of relational conversations and showing clients that it could be a win-win situation and says, *"A & E' went for it – 'Biography' went for it – The History Channel went for it – MTV went for it at the time. PBS did. Court TV did. Now they're Tru TV. Many did."*

I was curious why many of the other studio engineers did not adapt and Bill answered, *"I think now people are more knowledgeable. Five years ago nobody thought of it. Veteran guys are coming up with these mobile systems but they're lugging around cases and cases of stuff because they have the old studio biases in their heads – and this is why the younger ones are going for the newer work method. The guys who are 30, 40, and 50 still working in the industry want the big mixing console to impress the client with a person coming into the room every 15-minutes saying 'can I get you anything?' They like the glamour of it. I'm at a certain point in my career that I don't need any of it anymore. I haven't had a demo reel in ten years. It's time for me to taking the money home instead of saying, 'no I'll take a really low paying job so I can work with all this cool equipment.' No, no, no. I'm going to work with the equipment I need to do the job – and charge less. If I work in a studio and they're charge \$700 an hour – and they are paying me \$75 or \$90 an hour to mix – no, no, no. I'm going to do the same job for \$250 an hour – and sell that against their \$700 – and put the whole \$250 in my pocket and I've just tripled my money."*

## **The Takeaway: The New Freelance Is Starting Your Own Company**

Bill through technological innovation, portable mixing expertise, and creative engagement with clients is reinventing the freelance sound recording business. What I most appreciated about our conversation was learning firsthand about the major historical shifts in the audio

recording industry and how Bill has positioned himself on the frontline of these changes. The conversation explores his early background with New England Digital, the company who built the Synclavier, where he would go to sessions with Sting, George Michael, and Lucas Film and demonstrated how to interface with the new system. This discussion is a blueprint for individuals interested in learning about rate negotiation, the freelance process, and an understanding of the corporate and government hurdles for the self-employed. Bill shows no mercy when it comes to the current administration's relationship to small business. He cleverly calls himself a member of "*the radical center*" – uncomfortable with the policies of both Republicans and Democrats.

His stories about clients and the challenges of getting paid or receiving adequate information needed for a job are priceless – especially the client who requested a "*Tampon-like sound*." Bill describes the psychological culture of freelance and what's missing is often having backup in case you get stuck. He doesn't need it because he was always the go-to guy. For younger and less experienced audio engineers, it is a challenge that needs to be considered. Bill mentions that although computers have the capacity to push the creative envelope, they are being used to produce different versions to solve internal problems and decision making that should have been handled beforehand. He's very clear that the "new freelance" is starting your own company and becoming a vendor which requires treating yourself like a business and not just going to the next gig and depositing a check into your personal account.

### **Bill's Comments – Rewriting A New Script For The Future**

It has been a year since I visited Bill Cavanaugh in Rhinebeck, New York. He was very candid about the collapse of the audio recording business in New York and describes a scenario of compression and expansion. "*The compression is less work for reduced rates while moving at a faster production pace – and the expansion is the increased time it takes to get your check from a business.*" What I appreciate about Bill is that not only does he recognize the shift but is also thinking about rewriting his script for the future. Many of us create a life scenario and we follow the script whether it's working or not. Bill adds, "*I know that I initially wanted to be a rock and roll star and you just have to keep changing the script to reflect the reality.*" He is buying some time before facing retirement and says, "*I'll have to write a new script. So many people continue to follow a narrative they wrote as adolescents and are unable to adapt.*" Social Constructionist and Communication theorist, Sheila McNamee suggests that in our talk of imagined futures, "we invite coordination of many convergent and divergent understandings of the past and present" (Gergen, Schrader & Gergen, 2009, p. 106). Bill discusses how many of us put ourselves on a path that is not good and meaningless at a certain point in our lives, "*Am I on the right path following a script that I wrote in the 1970s – one with a reality that it's beginning to crumble? It will force me to rewrite another script – turning into myself and doing what I really want to do. What is that script?*" Bill is getting ready to embark on the "dream cycle" as described in Appreciative Inquiry's change cycle – "creating a clear results-oriented vision of higher purpose, i.e., What is the world calling us to become?" (Gergen, Schrader & Gergen, 2009, p. 236). I am looking forward to Bill's future narrative.

**Kate Farrell - Executive Producer**



# Kate Farrell

## **Appreciative Reflection – Executive Producer**

Kate and I had a great day together in Millbrook, New York in the Hudson Valley hanging out at her home, visiting a local café, and reminiscing about studying scriptwriting in graduate school at Ohio University in Athens in the late 80's. We managed to see each other prior to this visit so there were not any dramatic physical surprises that can happen after not seeing someone for a long period of time. We both have all our original body parts and are probably healthier now than in the past. This is due to the fact that we have both been engaged in the habits of healthful eating and exercise as a way to counteract a high stress profession.

Our conversation was an all day affair as we managed to cover the highlights of our respective lives during the past ten years. I gained considerable insight into her career transition from being parts of the producing team for major sports broadcasting events, including Super Bowls and Olympics, to moving into the realm of reality television where standard negotiations and contracts are often thrown out the door. At certain levels of hiring in the world of reality television is hire and fire at will. I was very impressed with my friend and amazed at the skill sets she had amassed. A good storyteller can create engaging and entertaining projects that intersect many different genres.

As a four-time Emmy award-winning freelance sports television producer for NBC's Olympic Unit, ABC, CBS, ESPN and various production companies, Kate has produced shows around the world and barely had time to relax at home.

Recently, she moved into a full time position as an executive producer at WE-tv (*Sinbad: It's Just Family*, *Texas Multi Mamas*, *My Fair Wedding*, etc.) in New York after freelancing for years and she's back living in the city. Media folks frequently swing between full-time and contract work depending on their life situation and available work. The rest of the population is now engaging in similar configurations of full time and freelance work in an effort to cobble together gainful employment. There is a lot to be gained by studying media freelancers because they have been mixing work styles longer than other professions and have a lot of great insight.

## **Super Bowl Assistant Director**

Kate's first job was right out of graduate school for a company called TWI, which was the world's largest independent production company at the time – the 1980s. She notes, *"They represented people like Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus back in the 60's and then they started the television division called TWI. I worked with them for seven years, traveled all over the US on sports jobs. I was the live AD (Assistant Director) for the international feeds of three Super Bowls. . .I was always on the edge of actually doing something that I*

*really wanted to do. They gave me just enough – and I was probably making \$30,000 to \$40,000 in New York. I knew that people who had my experience who were doing production work at the networks and they were making \$90,000 a year.*

## **The Real Apprentice**

*“Then in 1992, NBC came to do a show with our company and the guy who was in charge of it was a hotshot sports producer and everyone in my company was afraid of him. Nobody wanted to call him and talk about the project we had in front of us. I said, ‘give me his phone number and I’ll call him’ and he said, ‘are you the one that made those horrible pieces last year?’ I said ‘yeah, I’m that one.’ Well he said, ‘they sucked.’ And that was my introduction to working with a big time network sports’ producer. I said, ‘teach me how to do them better.’ So when I worked with him I realized he had a lot of talent. He saw my potential and he helped me.”* This was a relational opportunity where a determined, strong person was able to push the ego aside and ask for guidance. Kate was enhancing her on-the-job education without having to retool at school. This is a reminder, especially in a workforce that requires teamwork, that we can utilize resources and talent within our organizations to foster collaboration or learn new skills. This kind of mentorship is invaluable and allowed Kate to go to the next level. She returns the favor by motivating and encouraging many of the freelancers who work on her productions. Kenneth Gergen, a psychologist, recognizes the importance of mutual engagement in the student and teacher relationship:

The system teaches and the student learns; the factory grinds out its products. On this view, we have no easy way of asking about the effects of the students on the system; we don’t ask about the effects of computer software on the factory that produced it. But what if we view the student and the teacher as participants in a relationship? I am not speaking here of a relationship of bounded units, causing each other’s movements like so many billiard balls. Rather, they are engaged in a relationship in which they are mutually creating meaning, reason and value. . . With mutual engagement the student and teacher actively participate in a mutual process of teaching/learning. (Gergen, 2009, p. 245)

What if the “teacher and student” role of mentoring was extended to the workplace? Then learning and teachable moments would foster inventive collaborations and conversations that are desperately needed to revitalize the workforce of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Unfortunately, we often sit in our respective cubicles restricted by time constraints and/or the fear of someone else gaining the competitive edge. Talent needs to be appreciated and cultivated in order to thrive. Kate says, *“young people don’t get encouraged enough and have someone around them who recognizes what their strengths are and who says – you know what, you’re a good writer.”* She suggests that they ask their employer after they’ve done a job to just give them some feedback. Kate expands, *“what did I do well? What could I have done better?”* There are not enough conversations about our performance -- unless it breaks down.

## **Skating into Freelance: The Olympics in Lillehammer**

Kate worked on a couple of shows with her sports broadcasting mentor while working at TWI and says, *“I was still making no money and this other producer at CBS asked if I would like to go to the 1994 Olympics. I was thrilled. My staff job wouldn’t let me quit. So I went*

*to Lillehammer and made a nice freelance salary per diem and still was making my salary. One month later, NBC asked me to do another gig so I quit my job and started my freelance life. It was the 1994 World Figure Skating Championships. I had the potential to make \$10,000 on the gig and it would be a month and a half of work and it would be stories on-site. I didn't know exactly what I had to do but I knew I had to do profiles of certain athletes – I had to pitch what stories I thought were good – then on site I would have to edit them and then help make the prime time show.”*

### **Steffi Graf's Breasts: Dealing With Sexism in Sports Media**

We talked about the environment twenty years ago, and although sexism in sports broadcasting was in the equation, Kate managed to run with the opportunity and thrive. Kate estimates that there was a small band of about twenty women working in production at all the networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS) in sports. She admitted to working harder than the guys to prove herself. This kind of straightforward approach has held her in good stead in a business known for brashness. She comments, *“I had a mouth. I had a lot of people say things to me. I was in a meeting with two guys in their 30's and another man in his 50's. This was a meeting and they started talking about Steffi Graf's breasts and they just kept doing that. I finally said, 'can we get back to the show?' They said, 'does this make you uncomfortable?' I finally said, 'I think Steffi Graf has a great body. . .but aren't we here to do a show?' She continues, “I thought they were acting like they were in high school – shock factor stuff. They weren't dangerous, just inappropriate.”* Kate has a backbone and has the ability to speak her mind without alienating or offending her coworkers. There is no doubt that being one of eight siblings helped her to develop a self-assured relational style. You don't get what you need or want unless you speak up.

### **In Search of a More Balanced Life**

Kate comments, *“I was paid well. I made \$140,000 a year and I thought it was fine. But I was tired you know being freelance and working at the Olympics. I worked a lot. I spent my entire 30's traveling. I did it for five Olympics . . .Lillehammer, Nagano, Atlanta, Sydney and Salt Lake City. . .two CBS Olympics and three NBC Olympics. When I worked for NBC, I did Olympic profiles and I was on the production team that covered gymnastics. I was overseeing the profile unit for gymnastics. I was tired. When I was 40, I stopped working in sports full-time. Most of the people I traveled with were men who were married and had families. I wasn't married. I didn't have a family. That's when I decided that something was missing here. All of a sudden I'm 40 . . .and the last thing I remember was that I was 28.”*

### **Numbers Runner: Take Charge of Your Finances**

She was able to take a break because she was financially savvy about the business of freelance and that is something we were not taught in school. She had worked consistently in the freelance world for the past twenty years and was smart enough to get an accountant on board in the early days. Kate notes, *“ . . . there probably should be a handbook about the financials – what you write off. Having the right accountant to guide you saves money on taxes. Sometimes you get paid big chunks of money with no taxes out and you can have a huge bill come tax time if you aren't careful. I've had the same accountant since 1983. He's seen me move from a waitress to executive – and helped me save some money along the way.”*

Kate is also frugal and understands the value of saving, *"I don't really buy a lot of things like new cars although I have to have nice Mac products. They are part of being a freelancer. You need a great computer. When you arrive on a job, you are expected to have a computer. Also I know if I take a job for less than I want monetarily – I'll be resentful. Maybe I've lost some jobs along the way by asking for a certain amount of money and not budging on it – but I know that as someone who hires people – I always want to give them what they think they're worth."*

### **Get Therapy: Learn Emotional Management Skills**

Kate's other pertinent advice was for people to ground themselves so they would not get pushed around in this tough business. Kate comments on the highs and lows, *"there is a lot of stress and a lot of money on the line and that often means ego can be at play, if you haven't been to therapy or dealt with some of your personality challenges, it will show under extreme circumstances. I would advise people to be as grounded as they can be. It would be good to get some therapy."* She adds, *"I've seen people cry or make people cry – or do stupid things on shoots because of the high level of emotions running around. It's a stressful, fast-paced business that costs a lot of money. The stakes are high so it helps to stay focused."* When you are on a shoot for 12+ hours, it is critical to be balanced emotionally, physically, and have a consistent practice for relaxation.

### **Healthy Lifestyle For Sanity Versus Vanity**

The attention to health extends far beyond a fixation on beauty and competing in a youth fixated industry. Sure that is one component but the more dominant reality is that the media industry is a high drama and deadline driven profession that requires decompression at the end of the day. Exercise is a safer antidote than drugs and alcohol. Self-care is a priority for many of the freelancers involved with this project. Kate says, *"I work out, eat well, do yoga and spend time with friends. If you spend a lot of time in dark edit bays, it can be draining. The hours are long, you are sitting down, and you often work through lunch. Sometimes, in the edit room I do handstands. When I haven't been able to work out, I just tell the editor to stand by – I'm just doing a handstand. They're okay. Sometimes they'll do them with me. It helps if you go out to lunch together – take a walk, if you go get coffee or say to the editor that I'll be right back – I'm going to take a walk. When I was younger, I would look at the older guys that I worked with and they'd say, 'I'm going to take a walk,' (SURPRISED TONE) You're taking a walk in the middle of an edit? (LAUGHS). Now, I know what they were doing – they were clearing their head."*

The health issue is even more critical in this economic downturn because co-pays have escalated and insurance deductibles are higher. For freelancers, there are no paid sick days and that is why health becomes even more essential. As we balance the accelerated demands of an evolving and rapidly changing economy – personal healthcare awareness takes on a more significant role.

### **Working As A Freelancer Has Made Me A Better Producer**

I mention to Kate that one freelancer discussed the social disconnect of not having a place to hang his coffee mug. Kate relates, *"I understand what that person is saying because you kind of feel like an alien with no planet or place to land your little spaceship. When I first started working at NBC Sports as a freelancer – it was very skeletal with its staff. The*

*big-shot producers never came into the office. They just went from game to game. You had the production assistant who were there and the secretaries – and I was a freelancer who was coming into work at the computer and look at tapes. And I remember that the staffers didn't treat me very well.” Did they think that maybe you wanted their job? Kate's response, “some people did. But I also think they resented the breezy attitude. And I had to say things like ‘hi – I'm looking for a pen. Can I get some paper?’ What you learn as a freelancer is to find the nicest person in the office, ingratiate yourself to them, and you get the office supplies. I may appear on the outside to be an easier gig – you come in at 9:30 or 10:00 AM and watch tapes until 6:00 PM – but you carry all the responsibility of the work with you. There is often no support of your efforts. So you have to learn to read people to get along better and reading people is part of being a good producer.”*

Kate notes that her experience as a freelancer has made her a better producer, “because you know how to make other people comfortable. When I supervise a team, I ask if they need anything. I feel I can tune into the person who has been left out.” Kate's gift is making a temporary environment inviting. She notes, “on the show I just completed (*Raising Sextuplets*). . . people got offered better jobs and left because of a two-week hiatus but one team member was offered a better job with more money on the ‘*Kardashians*’ but she said she just couldn't leave me. I made sure that we gave her a raise and a bonus.”

### **Criteria for Organizing A Production Crew**

Although credits make a difference, Kate feels that what they sound like on the phone impacts how she hires. Kate adds, “I've actually hired directors and editors before meeting them. Sometimes you're not in the same physical space with them right away. With a director, I listen to how much he or she listens. And are they really paying attention because a director has to pay attention. That's a crucial part of their job--to listen and to respond – or set the track for everyone to follow. I look for intelligence. It's how they answer. It was obvious the last time I called a couple of directors that I was stressed out. The guy that I hired (for ‘*Raising Sextuplets*’) was very calm and he said – ‘yeah, I have a kid and I'm kind of excited to swing a camera with six little kids around.’ I liked that. He already saw himself in the room.” I noted that he was reassuring about his comfort zone with children and Kate concurs, “I like someone who is calmer than me on the shoot. He was the grounding energy that the show needed.” McNamee describes the importance of ‘future-talk,’ “We underscore the relational construction of our worlds. We fabricate together what we might live into” (as cited in Gergen, Schrader & Gergen, 2009, p. 105). The director was engaged in a future-oriented discourse that created a sense of shared possibilities.

Kate discusses an editor that was good – but had very bad time management skills. “He always seemed to be a day late for shipping cuts to the network and that really worries the network and it reflects badly on the way I am managing the workload. I was in the room with him until four in the morning every once in a while. I would come in at three in the afternoon and say, ‘do you need anything?’ He'd say, ‘no I'm good.’ I'd come back at seven to review the cut and it would be all ‘*mishugana*.’” Kate observes, “I realized this guy had me on a tether. His work habits made him in charge of my production. And even though we only had about four weeks of work, I started looking for a replacement. I interviewed someone to do a small job and loved him. He was breezy. If I got anxious about his deadlines, he told me to chill out – ‘I'm getting there.’ – and he would get there. I



*loved it. I wanted to go to lunch with him. He made me feel like I was having a more interesting life when I was in the room with him. The other guy made me feel like I was Mel Gibson carrying the cross. I fired the guy who was probably the better editor (but a bad time manager). I let him go because he made my life miserable.” Kate notes, “I would never have made that decision when I was younger. I could do it at this time because I could help the guy who was not as good an editor make a great show. So partially how I hire people has to do with how I get along with them.”*

Although credits are important, it is more about the relationship when it comes to hiring. How does that person make you feel when you are with them? Kate recently hired a crew of people so it was fresh in her mind. *“For the job of post supervisor or post-production producer – same job, different titles. We interviewed a woman and a guy. The guy had more experience and was asking for more money. But he was like, ‘I can do it – no problem – it’s a little bit of a drive – I may have to come in a little later if you’re okay with that?’ He was good and if he were the only candidate for the job I would have offered it to him. The woman who we hired was attentive. I watched her watching the nonverbal communication in the room. I thought she was smart and wanted the job more. She had a lot of energy. The business owner wanted me to hire the guy and pay him less.”* The male candidate sounded blasé to me as if he had done it a million times. Kate agreed, *“most places have twenty edit rooms and we only had two. So, the job looked less like a challenge to him and the woman seemed to want to take over a project that needed a good organizer. I pushed for her, we hired her and she was excellent.”*

“The eyes are a fascinating source of nonverbal communication. Of course, there are the obvious signals: the wink, rolling of the eyes upward, and the stare. But there are also subtle ways of communicating with the eyes” (Gergen Schader & Gergen, 2009, p. 11). Kate was observant about the way the woman was watching the nonverbal communication in the room and this spoke volumes about her attentiveness. Kate’s ways of being presents us with an image of a relational being who not only focuses on her relationship with her co-workers but also who is also mindful of how her co-workers are also relationally present.

## **Learning to Trust Your Intuition**

*“You have to trust your gut when it comes to being a good freelancer. When your gut has a warning signal, you have to listen. This woman that we hired to do the post-production supervisor job, I had a feeling she wasn’t right. I didn’t have a lot of time to make the decision. She was slow moving. I had a lot of work to do and we hired her. Everything I asked her to do she said, NO. There was always an excuse. They were all within her job description. Finally I asked to see her job description and I reviewed the tasks with her and finally she just said, ‘I don’t think this is going to work out.’ I said, ‘I don’t think so either.’”*

As a freelancer, you enter new environments and must quickly assess the hierarchical and relational dynamics in order to thrive. Kate makes no apologies for a subjective knowing based on previous experience, instinct, and intuition beautifully described in *Women’s Way of Knowing*:

. . .the move away from silence and an externally oriented perspective on knowledge and truth eventuates in a new conception of truth as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited; thus we are calling this next position subjectivism or

subjective knowing. . .The shift into subjectivism, we believe, a particularly significant shift for women when and if occurs. Our reading of the women's stories leads us to conclude that as a woman becomes more aware of the existence of inner resource for knowing and valuing, as she begins to listen to the 'still small voice' within her, she finds an inner source of strength. . .Women's growing reliance on their intuitive processes is, we believe, an important adaptive move in the service of self-protection, self-assertion, and self-definition. Women become their own authorities. (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997, p. 54)

Kate's intuitive skills, tested with time and experience, allow her to make rapid-fire decisions and corrective countermeasures in a business that demands expediency and speed.

### **The Freelance Factors**

I asked Kate about the factors that influence her work? She responds, "*There's geography, there's relationship, there's money, and there's interest. When you are a freelancer, you actually have a choice about what you will work on. Sure, you worry about money but if the subject really doesn't interest you, you don't have to take the job. If you're lucky to have some money in the bank, you ask, 'what am I passionate about?' I have worked as both a staff person and a freelancer. And I know that it's refreshing for a staff person to work with a freelancer – it feels like a breeze comes in. They're not grounded in a way like staff people are (KATE IMITATES DEPRESSED STAFFERS) 'I hate this job.' Freelancers are like (HAPPY VOICE) 'I just came back from a tennis match – what's going on?' Their life is their life. They risk relationship and security – but you are living every day. You are living the life you want to live.*"

### **Takeaway**

What I love about Kate is her joie de vivre. She is energetic, strong-willed and opinionated. When Kate was told, "*you're never going to make it in New York*" – she was inspired to move there. Without her tenacity, she would have never worked on the Olympics or the Super Bowl.

After working on the reality show "Raising Sextuplets" as a freelancer, Kate is now working full time for the company that hired her to repair the show. She currently is an Executive Producer at WE-tv in New York.

Kate talks at great length about how ESPN and reality television concessions were industry game changers. She candidly discusses the unspoken rate card, budgets, hiring, working with international crews and the art of negotiation. The subject of aging in a youth-fixated industry will be discussed in the chapter on "*Creativity and Aging.*" Kate examines how freelance challenges friendships and relationships. She advises, "*The person working beside you could be your boss the next day. I would have to say that I've burned some bridges with people through my ego, temper or personality. I think that's going to happen in this business. Don't regret it – keep moving.*"

At the end of conversation, I asked if our discussion was useful. Kate replies, "*Nobody ever asks you this many questions about your work – and actually listens. Are you kidding? It's like being in therapy.*"

## jimi izrael – Culture Critic and Journalist



# jimi izrael

## **Appreciative Reflection – Culture Critic and Journalist**

With his long dreads, muscled body and infectious laugh – there's no way jimi izrael could go "incognegro" -- a term he used recently when apologizing for not promptly returning my phone call. "Incognegro," defined in the online socially constructed Urban Dictionary as "a black person trying to maintain a low profile" (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=incognegro>).

### **Conversational Catalyst**

We met in the early 2000s when I taught a screenwriting at Cleveland State University and have remained supportive friends. jimi was already an accomplished journalist and cultural critic. What makes jimi successful as a writer and a nationally recognized commentator is that he's wickedly funny and culturally savvy. In my class, I occasionally reminded him that he needed his own show. There is no doubt that the classroom experience often has elements of improvisational comedy including the occasional hecklers. jimi would make provocative statements, sit back and watch the classroom erupt. For example, he told one of the African American students that his screenplay character wasn't black enough. His remark was the opening salvo for a lively group discussion on class differences and why black isn't always about sounding "ghetto." jimi brings an interesting slant to most issues and it is never a group-think opinion. He's fearless about speaking "his" truth and our classroom provided the forum for many free-spirited exchanges that are still remembered favorably by former students. Now jimi is paid for his insightful, and often controversial commentary.

### **Cultural Provocateur**

jimi izrael is currently a weekly panelist on the NPR (National Public Radio) series *The Barbershop* that is part of the radio series *Tell Me More*. *The Barbershop* is a conversational forum, moderated by Michel Martin, where jimi discusses politics, sports and pop culture events with syndicated columnist Rubin Navarette, civil rights attorney Arsalan Ifithar and NPR Political Editor Ken Rudin. You don't have to agree with jimi – but clearly he has an opinion. Here their polyvocal discussions offer commentary on current events and this not only makes the conversation memorable but it also allows the listener to form their own opinion. Click on the following link to listen to jimi izrael and cohorts on NPR *Barbershop* segments ([www.npr.org/series/14681732/barbershop](http://www.npr.org/series/14681732/barbershop)).

## **Too Many Women Turn Men Into A Cross Between Their Girlfriend And A Lap Dog**

In April 2010, jimi was a guest on a *Nightline FaceOff* discussing why it's so difficult for a black woman to find a good black man. This forum discussion is moderated in front of an audience. Panelists include Hill Harper, actor and star of *CSI: NY*; Steve Harvey, syndicated radio show host and author; Sherri Shepherd, comedienne and co-host on *The View*; and Jacque Reid, regular guest co-host on *The View* and former BET nightly news anchor. Watch the April 2011 segment of the *Nightline FaceOff* by clicking on the following link ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjIPVs2D24o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjIPVs2D24o)).

jimi is the first panelist asked, *"Why do you think women cannot find the man of their dreams?"* jimi responds, *"There's nothing wrong with standards but your standards have to be reasonable. Some of these women need to understand that you have to be the person you're looking for."* Then jimi suggests they're looking for a picture perfect Denzel Washington archetype that doesn't exist. jimi adds, *"...coming up to the house in a new Maybach Benz, with a trunk full of Godiva chocolate and a suitcase of 100,000 bills and it's not going to happen."* Sherri talks about what she's looking for in a man and says, *"We should be looking for what we love – a man that loves God – a man that loves his family – a man that gets along with his mother – a man that can support me as I would support him – a man that can fix my rotisserie because it broke – a man that can add to my son's life – a man that doesn't mind seeing me take my wig off – and help take the cornrows out of my hair. . ."* The camera pans to an audience of mostly black women enthusiastically clapping after Sherri's cornrow remark.

This is jimi's cue for a playful exchange, *"Wait a minute?"* Jacque Reid interrupts, *"Actually a man who respects women and likes women. . ."* The moderator says to jimi, *"You wrote in 'The Denzel Principle' that too many women try and turn men into a cross between their girlfriend and a lap dog. Does that sound like what Sherri's explaining?"* jimi incredulously notes, *"You want someone to take out your weave really – seriously? Come on now."* Sherri notes it's the most intimate part of what I do. She then comments, *"you don't want the real."* jimi reveals that he likes a sister with a natural. Sherri says, *"...and you'll get that once you take my cornrows out."*

The audience wildly claps, jimi laughs and the women toast their verbal takedown. jimi responds, *"Men are visual creatures – we're not that complex – you want us to switch channels from taking your weave out to thinking of you as the hot woman we married. Is that reasonable?"* Harvey says, *"if Sherri has a point of wanting a man to deal with the real – jimi's take is that we're aesthetic and love the visual -- there has to come an understanding. I can understand you wanting the real but in the reality of it – in your man's DNA he's not built to take your cornrows out – nor does he want to. You think showing his love for you is doing everything you want. Maybe you don't know how to be in love?"* Nothing in our DNA has us taking out cornrows. If you have a man that can do cornrows and take it out – that ain't your man." The audience and panel break out in thunderous laughter.

## **Conversations Enable Us To Appreciate Diverse Viewpoints**

Hill Harper adds a serious tone about the necessity of this conversation because it is about saving the black family. Hill notes, *"In 1966, 84% of African American children lived in a*

*two-parent households and fast-forward to 2006 the number is at 31%.”* This improvisational riff, with everyone playing off each other’s comments added a playful element to the conversation, thus creating quotable sound bites that can be viewed on youtube.com (see previous link to play video) and subsequently allowing the discussion to continue.

### **Self-disclosive Storyteller: “Shameless Joe Jackson”**

There are countless interviews with jimi izrael offering cultural commentary. One of my favorites is when he was interviewed on a CNN segment after receiving notoriety for his blog where he commented on Joe Jackson’s shameful self-promotion at the BET award’s post mortem tribute for his son Michael. The blog entitled “Shameless Joe Jackson” read, “. . . *I have friends who have lost parakeets, dogs, guinea pigs and wino uncles, and they’ve spent more time in mourning than Michael Jackson’s father. I’ve been more distraught over bad sushi. He struck me as someone with a hurried agenda—in a hurry to cash a check—more than a man who has lost a son. What kind of grieving father pulls in publicists to give a statement about their grief, or a lawyer/yes-man, or some kind of micro-pimp huckster in a wide-brimmed hat to talk up some bootleg Blu-ray disk scheme.*” The following linked Blog on the root.com in June 2009 provides the entire Joe Jackson article ([www.theroot.com/views/shameless-joe-jackson](http://www.theroot.com/views/shameless-joe-jackson)). CNN segment expanded on the topic and this is where jimi unabashedly stated what many folks were thinking about Joe Jackson but were afraid to say in a public forum – click on the next link to hear July 2009 segment ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvNUBtgDQ&feature=grec\\_index](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvNUBtgDQ&feature=grec_index)).

jimi contextualized how people deal with death and grief by suggesting that when somebody dies they look to their family to set the tone and mentioned his own reaction when the comedian Nipsey Russell died. He illustrates McNamee and Shotter’s notion of “. . . how do we capture the unknown, the sense of creating something anew?” In response to “What kind of environment can we create?” McNamee mentions creating a conversational space where we get away from abstract positions such as “‘This is what I believe,’ ‘This is true,’ ‘This is right,’ ‘This is wrong,’ and those are abstractions. Instead I like to invite people to root those abstractions in a life story of their own. It doesn’t need to be extremely self-disclosive, but it’s rooted in a story. And that opens a possibility for us to be in a different kind of conversation than we would otherwise have” (McNamee and Shotter, p. 4). jimi masterfully creates the conversational space that McNamee states should be “rooted in life story of their own” away from abstract position. We see this in jimi’s personal story about the need to examine the family’s reactions to someone’s death in order to socially construct an appropriate response.

izrael deftly provides a visual and emotional snapshot of the Jackson family in mourning, “*The sisters are all broken up, mom is in pieces, and dad is off in the corner trying to sell bootleg t-shirts an CDs. I’ve got to say it’s a bad look. Joe Jackson just hit the wrong note.*” He then goes on to talk about the Al Sharpton circus coming to town. jimi then shares his story of looking to the Russell family to set the tone when the comedian Nipsey Russell died. A personal and relatable story is an example of how getting away from generalization adds enormous depth and color.

### **Improviser and Conversational Trickster**

Whether jimi izrael is a moderator on NPR, a blogger on theroot.com, talking about

*Shameless Joe Jackson* on CNN, or jousting with a special *Nightline* panel about why women can't find a good man – jimi gets media play because he offers a distinctive blend of “his” personal truth, reflection, irony and comedy combined with masterful improvisational skills. His approach appears to be spontaneous, but there are the elements of a scripted process since he relies on frequently recurring themes and readily accessible commentary extracted from bits and pieces of his articles, blogs or books (K. Gergen, Schrader, & M. Gergen, 2009). His ability to process and readily retrieve content allows for dialogic playfulness.

During our freelance conversation, jimi completely switches gears and says, “*Lainey, you have some nice toes – toes like escargot.*” Now what does that mean? He catches you off guard and does not allow you to perform in typical fashion and that's one of his gifts. I am forced to improvise, create something new and leave my already reloaded next question behind. The dialogue then moves from a typical scripted “interview” into the realm of conversation. His free-form quips are refreshing in an era of predictable canned newscast commentary. This was apparent when he played with the correspondent at the end of the CNN clip and said, “*stay classy baby. . .*” The correspondent was slightly surprised because he deviated from typically staid news banter and she laughs while awkwardly responding, “*Okay, I'll try.*”

As a conversational trickster, he effectively responds with a line or comment that surprises or disrupts. Frank J. Barrett, in an article correlating jazz improvisation with improved organizational creativity, discusses how veteran jazz musicians often make deliberate disruptions that demand new responses (Barrett, 1998).

## **Education Gives You More Choices**

As an educator, I appreciate his honesty when it comes to painting a realistic portrait of the job market for a freelance journalist. He was candid about seeing a 60-percent reduction of his freelance rates in less than four years. He notes, “*I feel sorry for those kids that are coming out of J school with the slips in one hand and the degree in the other – hopeless. They are about to get kicked in the teeth because those jobs just aren't there. The jobs that are there are paying shit. You will be in and out within a week – a few months – because the business model for the newspapers has changed. Even those kids with Internet skills – everyone has Internet skills and there's nothing to make you special anymore. They still don't teach you how to develop your voice – so even your voice as a writer doesn't make you special. You're coming out with the same skills every Jack and Jill has and the same piece of paper. It's going to be bad – really bad. I'm a writer. I'm not just a journalist. I'm not just a screenwriter. I'm a writer. I can write whatever you've got. A lot of kids come out of J-school. . .they're going to be managing a Denny's.*”

I mention to jimi in our conversation that I frequently advise my students to be entrepreneurial about creating their own jobs or projects. He fires back, “*that's the Cosby model of what a college education is supposed to do. . . I tell my son that a college education doesn't guarantee a job – but it does give you more choices and I think that's what we need to start teaching students. If you're going to college thinking that you are going to get a job at the end then you are woefully mistaken. But at least you will have more choices between Wendy's and McDonalds or between Starbucks and Caribou where you can work. Now a college education in theory will give you some variables on what you can do with your life. But you're better off with one than without.*” jimi's remark reminded

me of my own father who after listening to me whine about the economic downturn and my rant about a wasted education in the 1970s responded, “*college is not about jobs – there are few times in your life when you get to read great books and explore new ideas.*” Jimi’s comment helped me to reframe my role as an educator and at the same time remember my father. His remark was a relational moment of past meeting present – and now our dialogue will undoubtedly find itself extending into future conversations with my students.

## **Creating A Space In The Classroom For Conversation**

How do I motivate and serve students? Student reviews have suggested that they enjoy my course because they can speak their mind. Active classroom engagement goes back to the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher, who “emphasized the power of discourse to increase understanding of multiple perspectives and create myriad possibilities. Bakhtin held that relationships and connections exist among living things, and that dialogue creates a new understanding of a situation that demands change” (B. Sloan, 2008, p. 5).

Carolyn Shields, author of *Bakhtin*, suggests that Bakhtin principles of openness would not only enhance educational reform but also extend to dialogue on critical issues and notes:

Bakhtin suggests an ontological approach – one that takes difference and heteroglossia as foundational to life itself. Life as he comprehends it is vibrant, open, fluid, and temporary. Education, if it is to truly bring people to a fullness of life, should also be vibrant exciting, challenging, and open, with the goal of deeper understanding rather than rigid knowing. . . Helping people to have dialogue about such central topics both with others, and internally, rather than silencing debate about critical issues out of fear of losing control would be consistent with Bakhtin’s writing. (Shields, 2007, p.174)

With screenwriting projects ranging from cannibalism to cannabis, the creation of a space where students could feel safe discussing their work while offering critiques contributed to the success of that course. bell hooks in *Talking Back* discusses the influence of the educator Paulo Freire who challenges the downstream model of education where knowledge flows from a “powerful” educator to a “powerless” student. hooks says, “Education, it was suggested, could be a space for the development of critical consciousness, where there could be dialogue and mutual growth for both student and professor” (hooks, p. 101). Kenneth Gergen in *The Saturated Self* concurs, “Teachers should invite students into modes of dialogue as participants rather than pawns, as collaborative interlocutors instead of slates to be filled” (Gergen, p. 250).

The most interesting teaching and learning environments are places where the student and teacher relationship is constantly shifting roles. The classroom must be an educational incubator where ideas can be respectfully examined and nurtured. I am always surprised each semester when students feel comfortable exploring and sharing sometimes intimate creative projects dealing with sexuality, identity issues, illness, etc. The classroom is a place where I can make a difference as an educator in my ability to provide a safe haven for respectful conversational exchange. In the article *Whose Classroom Is It Anyway? Improvisation as a Teaching Tool*, the authors suggest that students in the digital generation crave more social face-to-face interaction since they are already used to



meeting new people and experiencing greater diversity through the proliferation of social media sites (Berk and Trieber, year, pp. 34-35).

## **Best Advice**

*"These kids need to invent something – the next Google or iPhone app. There are just no jobs in media. These managers are holding onto their seats at newspapers – and they're just biting their nails every day just waiting for the pink slip. It's just a matter of time. These newspapers are just bleeding money. It's sick. Profits are down eight percent and people who are making six figures are the people that are doing to go first -- but the mailroom clerk. . ."* jimi then segues to the guy working in the mailroom. *"There's this joke I have about black people who work in mailrooms or as custodians – those are some of the most secure jobs there are. Those people don't have an education at all. But there's always going to be a floor that needs to be washed or mail that needs to be delivered. You know the mailroom guy that you're laughing at today with the headphones and 'afro' – he'll be there years and years and years after you're gone. He'll be the one with the gold watch. I know this for a fact. There's this guy I used to work with at McDonald and Company about ten years ago – and when I was there he had been there for eight years. Now flash forward ten or fifteen years later and he's a VP – because after awhile they have to give you another title – but he's still in the mail room and he has been there fifteen or twenty years. People are thinking that's really sad or pathetic – but at least he has a job. He knows he's going to be there."*

When asked about what kind of lessons he could offer an up-and-coming creative writer or freelancer he said, *"I would tell them to go work at Starbucks. I'm just lucky. I just happen to know what I'm doing. I wouldn't try to make a living freelancing. I wouldn't encourage anybody to make a living freelancing. I'd tell them to get a job at Starbucks. Write at night. Write first thing in the morning. Make tea or a small mocha the rest of the day. I said, 'That's harsh.'" He responded as only jimi can, "There's some PhD's working there right now that are really happy."*

## **The Takeaway -- The Courage to Speak His Truth**

jimi is open to discourse on a wide variety of topics including some of the most challenging to navigate and that's politics, race, religion and identity. I appreciate jimi's ability to take the heat, bring some new insight to an old way of thinking about a situation, and injecting an appropriate sense of humor into a serious conversation while relating a story or providing commentary. jimi offers a distinctive voice that makes us smile, laugh or get angry. He gets people to listen or react at a time when people barely remember anything because of media overload. jimi has the courage to stake a position, which is often politically sensitive, and the aplomb to handle the reaction.

During our interview, he related how he was genuinely afraid on his book tour for *The Denzel Principle*. *"I just came from Las Vegas. There was a table of fat women and they were just appalled. They were like 'Oh my God I can't believe some of the things you said.' They said, 'Why do you think we're single?' I just shook my head. I said, 'none of you can figure out why you're single? You've got three feet of weave in your hair. You're sixty pound overweight. You haven't seen a treadmill – maybe on TV.'" jimi is unrelenting and notes, "You try telling that to people who don't want to look in the mirror. This is one of two times where I've presented this book and I was actually afraid there was going to be*

*physical violence. I thought I was going to be attacked because these women were so angry. Nobody wants to hear that it could be you. These women don't mind hearing how fucked up black men are. We've heard that trope. It's sexy. It never loses popularity since antebellum times. You'll never go wrong saying black men are fucked up. Nobody ever turned to Topsy and said what's going on with you? Here I come. . ."*

In the CNN "Shameless Joe Jackson" interview, jimi stated that a quarter of the respondents in his root.com editorial didn't agree with him and responds, *"they accuse me of being another person just shilling for the white man who couldn't understand the pain that a lot of black people go through. . ."* jimi then humorously and cynically adds, *"it's hard out here for a white man."* Obviously, his candor deflects some of the negative comments.

### **jimi's Postscript**

One year since our last interview a lot has changed for jimi. He recently remarried and his wife works in Washington, DC. Although he does not want to leave Cleveland because of his children, he is searching for a full-time teaching opportunity. Even with multiple freelance venues such as NPR's *The Barbershop*; providing content for newspapers, blogs, and magazines; and with the publication of a new book, *The Denzel Principle: Why Black Women Can't Find Good Black Men* (izrael, 2010) – the increased Internet competition coupled with diminished sustainable freelance jobs and wages is forcing him to secure regular full time employment and work on his writing on the side. jimi is following the advice he gives students.

## Marc Jaffe – Comedy Writer



*Marc Jaffe*

# Marc Jaffe

## Appreciative Reflection – Comedy Writer, Entrepreneur and Philanthropist

Marc and I met when a mutual friend, Ayad Rahim (another *Migrant Creative* participant), invited us to a Cleveland Indians baseball game. Marc and his family lived in the same neighborhood and our paths would occasionally cross. He has worked as a writer for many well-known comedians including Jerry Seinfeld, Paul Reiser, Gary Shandling and Tim Allen. Ayad suggested that I invite Marc to my screenwriting class at Cleveland State University. Although that never transpired, I had a wonderful opportunity to have a conversation with him about his freelance career.

He completed his undergraduate degree in business at Emory University where he was also in an improvisation group that happened right around the time “*Saturday Night Live*” was getting started and notes, “*It was an improv and skit group – and occasionally people did standup and I did both. Then I went on to graduate school at the University of Michigan – there wasn’t a place to do skits – but there was a place to do standup at the university every week. I enjoyed it – was successful at it and spent some time between graduate school in Chicago performing in the clubs at night.*” Marc says, “*I have two sides to me. I enjoy business and it has helped me somewhat in my career path to have an understanding of business. I was working at the Board of Trade in Chicago during the day and pursuing my hobby at the time in the evenings doing standup. When I started being successful in Chicago – I realized that it was something I was okay at and could pursue. So when I finished my second year at school and I was pretty young – I decided that I would pursue the standup – and postpone any entrance into the corporate world. I went out to L.A. and did standup.*”

Marc was in Los Angeles from about 1982 to 1984. He comments, “*There’s a lot of competition out there. I was marginally successful. The best thing about being out there was the other people I met – like Gary Shandling, Paul Reiser and different people who had become pretty successful.*” Marc is driven more as a writer than a performer and has been a writer for about 20 years.

I asked about how he got the gig writing for Seinfeld. “*I had met Jerry a couple of times and didn’t know him more than the casual hellos. He had a show called the “Seinfeld Chronicles”. . .It was 1990, I saw the show and knew that it was perfect for me. He showed up in Cleveland and I stopped in to see him doing standup for the weekend. Afterwards, I talked to him, I had been doing some writing for Paul Reiser who was a good friend of his. When we talked, I said I’d love to submit some stuff for the show and he was very open to it. I sent him five to ten pages of standup stuff, which I thought would be appropriate for him. He called me the day after he got it and said this is great. He said*

*come on board. One time I was lucky in the right place at the right time – and asked – and had the stuff to back it up.” Marc remembers thinking, “do I even want to bother going to the club? My manager at the time said you have to go.”*

### **Seinfeld – “The Pick”**

Marc wrote many episodes for Seinfeld but the one that is classic, and consistently rated as one of the top ten, is the one where Elaine discovers she sent out a Christmas card photo with her nipple showing – “The Pick.” Click on the following youtube.com link to view clip (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7l4CF1StGkc>).

### **Free Time**

After my interview last summer, I had a newfound appreciation for his comedic wit. Marc has a very dry sense of humor. Even when I was setting up the appointment for our conversation he revealingly says, *“just come on over – I’m sure I’ll be free – I’m a freelancer. That’s where the free part comes in. It’s not that you do so much for free. It’s that you’re always free when somebody calls because you don’t have work.”*

### **A Comedy Writer Has the Lifespan of An Athlete**

His cynicism about comedy writing is founded in reality. *“No I have given up on that. It’s too hard when you’re not in L.A. -- I don’t know many who are still doing stuff – Larry Charles is doing movies and working with Larry David on ‘Curb Your Enthusiasm.’ The people that I knew from Seinfeld are probably working on their own projects. Some have moved back to where they are from. It’s a short window you have. It’s like an athlete.”* Marc’s recognition of when to move on is an example of his resilience and improvisational skills.

### **“Bonk” – “Jeopardy” Meets “The Three Stooges”**

It is his entrepreneurial side that has allowed him to move from standup to writing comedy – to creating game shows – and onward to partnering in a philanthropic organization with his wife. The malleable mind is able to face challenges and creatively shift to a course with less resistance.

Marc created a staged performance game show called *Bonk*. He calls it, *“Jeopardy meets ‘The Three Stooges.’ We ask funny or trick questions on a television game show.”* He describes the scene, *“There are three contestants and instead of having buzzers to check in and lock on other people. All the contestants are wearing hard hats and all have a mallet. If you think you know the answer, you bonk yourself on the head with the mallet and that blocks out the other people. So people are quickly trying to bonk themselves over their head. In subsequent rounds, if you don’t know the answer, you can hit someone else and force them to answer the question.”* This project is a collaborative effort with Kerry Pollack, a funny comic magician who comes up with tricks for Penn & Teller, and also David Copperfield. Marc notes, *“He has a company who sells magic tricks and electronic systems to magicians. He came up with the basic idea and then myself and another comic in town joined him to write the show.”* So far, it has been at eight resorts in Mexico, Las Vegas, Germany, and they are currently promoting it for television. The following link allows you to access videos of *Bonk* in action (<http://www.bonkshow.com>).

## **Reinventing: Elijah Drinks; Our Life**

You don't have to be Jewish to appreciate his latest invention. The "Elijah Drinks" cup is another collaborative creation and I asked him to provide backstory for a non-Jewish audience. Marc begins, *"There's a tradition at Passover Seder where a cup of wine is set up symbolically waiting for Elijah the prophet at your table. Some time after the meal is over; you invite Elijah in to drink with you. Most people go through a show of opening the door to let Elijah in. And of course Elijah never comes in. We ended up not having Passover at our house one year and this family we had it with – did something like shaking the table and pretending that he was drinking from the wine as it was moving around in the cup. I thought that was kind of lame. Why don't you have something so the wine disappears from the cup and then the light bulb went off in my head. I thought that could be made and I went to Kerry Pollack, the friend who is a magician (Penn & Teller/Copperfield) and could create all this stuff. We didn't want it to disappear gradually – it needed to go down all at once when the door was opened – preferably without having your hands on it."*

Four Passovers later it is on the market for "\$39.95" on Amazon. Marc jokes, *"It's a limited market. There are not enough Jews in the world. I'll have to go to China and make it cheaply or find another place where shipping wouldn't be a problem. Israel is another potentially big market. I've sold a limited amount to Israel because shipping is expensive."* Lately, I've seen the "Elijah Drinks" cup advertised on Amazon.com, and various Judaica websites. Click on the following youtube.com link to see Elijah Drinks (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozRlky5b0yw>).

Marc's ability to reinvent his career is an example of his flexibility but also demonstrates how our identity is not fixed but is a socially constructed work-in-progress. We are always adapting to relational encounters where the possibilities of joint action can emerge. Joint action, as John Shotter writes:

This kind of social activity is important, in that, due to their embodied, responsive nature, people in face to face interaction with each other cannot not be continuously creative of new responses, both to their circumstances and to each other. As a result, in such a form of activity, both the surrounding circumstances and other people's actions are just as much a formative influence in what we do as anything within ourselves; people are not so much acting 'out' of any of their own inner plans, or scripts, or suchlike, as 'into' a situation or circumstance already partially shaped by previous talk intertwined activities of others. Hence, its intrinsic appropriateness to its circumstances. But, what is so special about joint action, is that its overall outcome is not up to any of the individuals concerned in it; it is entirely novel; its outcomes are is if they have 'come out of the blue. (Shotter, 1997)

The Elijah Cup, a collaborative venture, is an example of the power of conversations to create joint action.

## **Less Pressure Because My Wife Works A Steady Job**

I asked Marc if his family accepted and appreciated his freelance lifestyle. He says, *"We have a lifestyle we couldn't live in L.A. My wife also works and has a steady job. It's not all upon my income. My income is supplementary."*

Marc's wife is the inspiration behind his book *"Sleeping With Your Gynecologist: Tales From My Marriage with an OB/GYN"* which has been adapted by CBS and Jersey Television to become a sitcom.

When asked if freelance is a privileged position he concurs, *"Oh yeah. To have the flexibility to say no to something and arrange your schedule the way you want. My wife's been great. It's not the norm for the wife to make the larger, steady income. She appreciates the work and likes that I can be there when she can't be."* This was evident when he was fielding a call from his daughter's summer camp arranging a call back time.

### **Essential Traits Of A Good Freelancer**

Marc suggests that awareness and self-acceptance are essential traits of a good freelancer. The ability to know you can just do something even if you know nothing about the subject requires self-awareness. Marc agrees, *"some times I would refuse a project because it doesn't fit my parameters. There are times when it doesn't but I still try it."* He mentions an animated cartoon for getting kids to brush their teeth. The acceptance part is often about making peace with the process or developing a product that does not fit your creative standards – or at times never even seeing it come to fruition.

### **Co-creating: "Side Effects May Include" and "Shaking With Laughter"**

During our conversation, Marc was secretive about a theatre project he was developing and says, *"The thing I'm working on now is a personal matter. Once it's out there, it won't be personal. Otherwise, I'm generally open to talking about things."* A year later he reveals a play he wrote with Eric Coble called 'Side Effects May Include' which is a fundraising vehicle for a foundation, he created along with his wife, called 'Shaking With Laughter' which raises money for Parkinson Research. His wife, an OB/GYN, was diagnosed with Parkinson disease four years ago.

*Side Effect May Include* is described as, "A roller-coaster ride through an escalating curtain of pills, fidelity, secrets, questions of manhood and womanhood, age, desire, more pills. The Good News: There are drugs that can control the symptoms for now. The Bad News: Potential fresh hell world of side effects. But Good News: His wife gets the rarest of side effects: A wildly amped sex drive not by Maggie since she was 19 years old! Bad News: Phil isn't nineteen." Click on the following link to find out more about his new play. (<http://www.cptonline.org/big-box-11-week-8.php>).

The richness of Marc's personal and professional life comes full circle with this collaboration with Eric Coble in creation of a play and the tandem development of a foundation with his wife. The play, *Side Effects May Include*, has received standing ovations and has been sold out. This is an example of how a powerful narrative has the power to change not only the writer (s), but the audience. "The 'I' as the center of the story must gradually be replaced by the 'we'" (K. Gergen, 2009, p. 177-178). This play is not only collaborative, but also generative in terms of laughter, raising awareness, and providing research funding. Marc demonstrates that sharing our story is the best medicine.

## **The Takeaway: Improvising Family and Career**

Marc and his wife Karen improvise a career lifestyle that works for the entire family. His self-created hours allow for the kind of flexibility where his wife can take on the demands of working as an OB/GYN while knowing that the kids and house are well managed. Marc and his wife engage in the improvisational practice of alternating between soloing and supporting (Barrett, 1998).

Marc has admitted that his family inspires many of his projects. His recent co-collaborations, *Side Effects May Include* and *Shaking With Laughter*, are prime examples of how they positively deal with the challenge of her diagnosis. They both continue to work full time. They created and co-chair the *Shaking With Laughter* foundation where they have raised substantial funds that are then donated to the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson research. The following link allows you to learn more about the foundation “Shaking With Laughter” (<http://shakingwithlaughter.org/>).

## **The Takeaway: Seizing Opportunity – Is It Really Luck?**

Luck is a word I hear often from freelancers. Marc attributes the Seinfeld gig to the luck of being in the right place at the right time. Is it a humble way to describe his success or is it a way to forfeit taking credit for work initiated or accomplished? Why luck? Did he not make the effort to seek the job and have the skills to back it up? Does saying “it’s luck” make it easier to handle when work isn’t there? I was curious about why so many freelancers used the word “luck” when opportunity knocks and they answer.

Then I read an article in *Psychology Today* called “*Make Your Own Luck*” and realized that all these participants possess many of the characteristics that avail themselves for chance opportunities and then they act.

Elizabeth Nutt Williams, a psychology professor at St Mary’s College in Maryland, found that chance was significant factor in shaping the career paths of thirteen professional women she studied. Women who take advantage of happenstance have competence, self-confidence and the ability to take risks. (Webber, May/June 2010, p. 64-66)

The author also notes that a relaxed approach to life certainly helps, “Anxiety in particular gives us tunnel vision; while we’re focusing on potential danger; we end up missing a lot of extraneous but potentially beneficial information” (Webber, May/June 2010 p. 64-66).

There is the suggestion that those who embrace serendipity are more fearless about trying something new. If they are willing to embrace something new, they must also be willing to accept failure. This article notes that “lucky people” are resilient and able to rebound if it doesn’t work. “And whether or not any chance taken turns out well or badly, the benefits of regularly seizing serendipity are many. For one thing, it increases our day-to-day happiness by bringing variety to our lives” (Webber, May/June 2010, p. 64-66). Click on the following link if you want to read the full article from *Psychology Today*, (<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201005/make-your-own-luck>).



## **The Takeaway: Everyone Is A Freelancer Now – They Just Don't Know It**

When asked if the freelance pay scale compensates for a fulltime career, Marc replies, *“Because of the nature of the business, you’re a freelancer always – even when you have job – it’s a temporary job.”*

Marc brilliantly captures the transitory nature of the workforce in this current economy. He notes, *“Even if you get a job on a TV show, a “Seinfeld” is rare that it lasts for so many years. So many shows last a year or a couple of episodes and then they’re yanked. It’s not even whether it’s a good show or not. It’s rare for people to even stay on a show for two or three years. A producer can change. Everything is a part-time job – it’s your full focus for a while. Standup you’re always getting a new job. You have to look at freelance as a whole career and there will be times when I will have a steady paycheck and times when I won’t.”*

## **Kasumi - Experimental Media Artist**



# Kasumi

## Appreciative Reflection – Experimental Media Artist

Kasumi and I met for the first time about fifteen years ago at a potential client meeting where the intention was to collaborate on an advertising project. The client's office, located in downtown Cleveland, was in total disarray with boxes everywhere and as Kasumi recollects, *"we couldn't tell if the client was coming or going."* We were both self-supporting single mothers who rarely declined freelance work. We bonded that day while walking out and intuitively knew that we'd never see a dime if we agreed to work on the project he described. After that, we worked together on a few commercial projects ranging from banking to hand sanitizers. There was a comfort level of trust and mutual respect that allowed for collaboration.

We both made the shift to academia over the following years and continue to pursue our respective creative endeavors. For the past nine years, Kasumi has been teaching digital arts at Cleveland Institute of Art. I migrated seven years ago to Winston-Salem State University – a historically black college that is part of the University of North Carolina system.

Recently, Kasumi was the recipient of the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship (2011) with a \$44,000 grant to create an experimental feature-length project entitled *Shockwaves*. Click on next link for Guggenheim award information (<http://www.gf.org/fellows/17097-kasumi>). The same year, while on sabbatical from The Cleveland Institute of Art, she received a \$20,000 Creative Workforce Fellowship from the Community Partnership for Arts and Culture in Cuyahoga County. The awards mentioned above are a few of the many other artistic grants Kasumi has received over the years. This recognition and remuneration has allowed Kasumi to be more discerning about the type of independent work she accepts.

### Starting Out: Never Say No

Kasumi, like me, would take on just about any freelance job in the beginning. She notes, *"I would never refuse a job. Every time a gig came along – even if I'd never done that particular thing – I'd take it on. Then, of course, I'd have to scramble to learn how to do it. Everything has a steep learning curve, but this way I learned an amazing number of skills that now allow me to pick and choose projects."* She discusses how taking on new skills can morph into something else. There's an openness that allows for the emergence of new possibilities.

*"There I was in Japan – with a baby and future ex-husband. I knew the end was imminent. I was teaching at a conservatory at that point, did a lot of concerts back then and making money. I was thinking, 'what the hell am I going to do to support me and my child?' I used to write a lot of letters – this was before email – I didn't even own a computer. I used to*

*write about Japan to my friends all over the world telling them what life is like here. I thought I could turn it into a book – say, a funny cookbook. I went to a couple of publishers in Japan and they said yeah, but drop the recipes and just write the funny stuff. I did that and got a book published in Japan.”*

## **The Urban Samurai**

Kasumi got divorced and came back to the United States with a child, settled in and looked for a publisher to produce the book in English. *“My publisher wanted me to write articles – opinion and editorial pages about different issues concerning Japan – in order to boost sales. I wrote pieces about economics, crime rates in Japan and America – all kinds of articles and actually got paid for it. Good grief, I now had a journalism career.”* Each step would lead to something else. Kasumi got paid when the articles were published. Surprisingly, she made even more money on making t-shirts from selected book illustrations. See figure 1 her Urban Samurai book cover (Kasumi, 1993). She reiterates, *“don’t think that anything you do is demeaning. A t-shirt from my book?”* You never know where the next step leads.

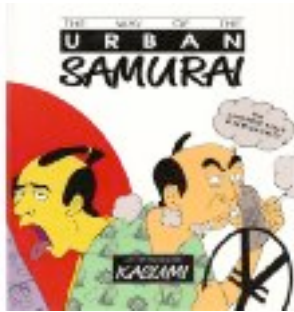


Figure 1: Kasumi's *The Way of The Urban Samurai* book cover. Selected images in book used for t-shirt designs.

## **Breakdown and Free Speech Zone**

Her publishing taught her how to research and that was essential for doing film work. *“I used these skills during the magical Bush years. I created two pieces that concerned themselves directly with politics, cognition, religion – the essence of political mind control: fear and greed.”*

*Breakdown*, recently showcased at the Ingenuity Fest (2011), won best remix Vimeo in a contest with 6,500 entries from around the world. Renowned director David Lynch judged the experimental film category. Watch *Breakdown* when you click on the next link: (<http://vimeo.com/13516268>). Click on the following link to experience *Free Speech Zone* and her digital collection (<http://www.kasumifilms.com>).

Kasumi is an innovator of an art form “synthesizing film, sound, video, and emerging technologies.” *BREAKDOWN* allows for “juxtaposing, layering, stacking, cutting, slicing, stretching, shuffling, remapping, warping, looping, re-ordering, filtering and otherwise manipulating sounds and images based on formal musical and visual qualities as well as multiple levels of meaning.” She adds, “this allows me to find and create further

*connections and analogies outside of their original context, triggering sequences of perceptual, cognitive, and emotional processes in the minds of viewers. In BREAKDOWN, these samples are woven into a polyphonic, contrapuntal tapestry of memory and expectation, of music and meaning out of which a story emerges: the eternal tale of greed, fear and fall of empire.”*

I appreciate the intricate crafting and attentiveness to details that goes into her work. Her artistic experimentation allows her to slice, dice, mash-up and remix thousands of public domain images without losing sight of her story. Her attention to sound design is as powerful as her visuals. Kasumi’s unusual background as a baroque musician and as an Academy Award nominated composer infuses all her projects. Kasumi’s brilliance is the she was able to give voice to a vast array of talents across multiple creative domains – digital media, publishing, painting, sound mixing, and recording – interweaving or at times standing alone. She is a self-aware artist who understands how uniquely she is positioned in digital experimental media and comments, *“now that I’ve developed my own style, even when I do commercial work, the client expects my style – the weirdness – the Kasumi brand.”*

## **The Science of Art**

The influence of Kasumi’s parents affected her nontraditional career trajectory. *“My mother was an artist who worked in a variety of media and my father was a NASA scientist – literally a rocket scientist, so I had the mixture of art and technology from the word go. My mother used physical found objects in her work in very creative and unusual ways. She was also quite entrepreneurial – forming little companies to sell her work and talents as artist. The ultimate optimist, she even delved into theater. The other side of the equation was my father engineer, rocket scientist, the eternal skeptic, systematic, questioning – but with a goofy Jerry Lewis sense of humor. Both my parents also had innate musical aptitude. If you put all these traits from both sides into a blender, puree, and you kind of get me.”*

There is a science to Kasumi’s art. She is meticulously professional in her planning and implementation. She suggests that being a performing musician was helpful in providing discipline. *“Practicing is practicing. If you’re a musician and don’t have ‘chops’ – can’t play your instrument – you’ll be laughed off the stage. In the fine art world – and this is an argument I have with the post-modern theorists: the lack of craft and destruction of the ‘object’ in favor of the concept. My old school background has caused a kind of ‘object worship’ – whatever I do has to be perfect and well crafted, perfected to the nth degree of perfection. If I have something to say, I want it to be honed.”*

## **We Are All Experimental Artists**

With commercial work as a designer or writer keeping her afloat, Kasumi followed her passion for experimental video without worrying about how she was going to make a living. She recalls her initial involvement, *“as a single mother, my child was very creative – as you know, kids are like sponges – they want to try everything. One of the advantages of being a single parent is that they get your full attention – and you get their full attention. Up to a certain age, there’s no one to tell you no. His father was in Japan. We were completely abandoned. There was no one to tell me, no that’s not appropriate or no, he’s too young.*

*It's like yeah, let's do it. He got involved in acting and film. To tell you the truth, I discovered digital movie-making technology when he was auditioning for films."*

Kasumi's ability to take a tough situation of what she considered abandonment and turn it to her advantage is what a great improviser does. Innovative individuals often take a huge leap of faith and trust their instincts when everyone else tells them otherwise. For Kasumi, the creative process allows her to make sense of life's complexities, while also helping to forge her own artistic identity. Kasumi's projects serve as a place of refuge where she can privately abandon herself to the creative process – and then the showing of her work fosters a sense of pride and purpose that connects her to a larger global community. Sheila McNamee notes, "Our problems in relationships are related to local, national and global politics, the state of the economy, shifting sensibilities in cultural values, and so forth. Metaphors, images, and technologies from other relational domains can re-construct a problematic situation in relational terms" (McNamee, 1996). Kasumi's meaning making, derived from her creative construction process, allows her to move from the individual to the collective and this is where the work can create a space for meaningful dialogue.

When it comes to learning digital technology, Kasumi is self-taught and this is attributed to her rocket scientist father's contribution – *"in that there was no technical thing that he feared, even though failed experiments could have blown up the entire city. At least in my work, this made me less fearful of technology – a mistake is not going to blow up the computer – just crash it."*

Kasumi is a lifelong learner who is unafraid to try something new or be inventive with a variety of art forms. She not only serves as a stellar role model for her students – but also for her son Kitao Sakurai. Kitao was recently listed by *Filmmaker* magazine as one of the "25 new faces in independent film" in 2011 (<http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/news/people/kitao-sakurai/>).

### **Best Advice: Asking "What If" Questions**

Kasumi offers good advice to any up-and-coming filmmaker or media artist when it comes to navigating a freelance career. She comments, *"I don't think you can really become an experimentalist until you've learned technique – in whatever the field. Creativity is about looking for answers, and experimentation is about asking the 'what if' question at each turn. Just keep asking and keep your eyes open. Keep your ears open. Keep learning new skills. Keep doing. Keep producing. Keep playing."*

### **The Liminal World of Freelance: A Cross Between Falling and Flying**

She discusses how she feels sorry for people in dead-end jobs and says, *"even as scary as freelance is, I would not have been able to do a 9-5 job – or at least do it happily. You are always standing on the edge of a cliff when you freelance. Kasumi describes freelance as, "a cross between falling and flying."* It was a beautiful way to describe the possibility of "what's next?" Kasumi cynically admits, *"it keeps me from shooting myself in the head because I want to know what happens next. If I'm gone, I won't know."* In the freelance world, the themes of fear and freedom are interwoven throughout many of the participants' conversations.

## **Freelance is Like The Film Festival Shorts Program**

Kasumi had one of the best descriptions for describing freelance work. *"It's kind of like going to the film festival shorts program. If one job really sucks, you know it will be over."* She really captures the essence of why freelance can be so attractive and double-edged, *"and if you love the people, you have the knowledge that maybe it will happen again and you can nurture that and make more things happen."*

## **Takeaway -- The Beauty Of A Nonlinear Career**

Even though working full time, Kasumi still operates as a freelancer and as she says, *"I manage well."* She stresses that an important aspect of preparation is being very organized – *"make lists, do easy tasks quickly and get them out of the way so you can concentrate on big things."* Although Kasumi's ideas are artistically edgy, her work style is laser focused and extremely pragmatic. The other advice was given by her mother, *"never assume anything."* Kasumi expands, *"everyone has a story and is interesting in some way."* Another reason she is never at a loss for discovering good material or stories for projects.

There is no doubt that the Guggenheim fellowship coupled with a deluge of artistic grants and video festival recognition continues to validate Kasumi's hard work and contributes to the generation of more creative projects. Kasumi, as the creator of a distinctive new art form, is expanding the contours of digital media art. As she notes, *"I'm poised to do more of the same – creating, experimenting and growing."* Kasumi deserves all the accolades and it did not happen overnight. She reminds me of how genius is cultivated – it's about being open, multidisciplinary, disciplined, collaborative, and not losing sight of your vision. Kudos to Kasumi for not only pushing artistic boundaries, gaining recognition for her contribution – but also, most importantly, making a living while following her passion in a very nonlinear fashion.

For more info: <http://about.me/kasumifilms>

## **Alan B. McElroy - Screenwriter**





# Alan McElroy

## Appreciative Reflection – Screenwriter

About ten years ago, I interviewed Alan for a Gund Foundation grant that was examining the sustainability of filmmakers and screenwriters making their home in Cleveland. What I admired then and now is his approachability, passion, and humble attitude along with his great success in the screenwriting industry. Although living in Cleveland to raise his family, Alan frequently commutes to Los Angeles for meetings and work related projects.

Alan visited my class at Cleveland State University and talked about his screenwriting projects – *Halloween IV* (1988) *Spawn* (1997), *Rapid fire* (1992), *Rolling Thunder* (1996), *The Marine* (2006). Recently, he adapted the video game *Tekken* (2010) for a live action feature. His project *Man and Wife* (2011) was picked up in a bidding war with *X-Men* producer Ralph Winter. He's currently working on three television pilots. You can view his credits on the International Movie Database: (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0568416/>).

### The Irony: Hated To See Cruelty; Became a Screenwriter

His great passion is science fiction and time travel screenwriting, but is skilled at many different genres from horror, suspense and war stories to relational drama. Alan's a self-described futuristic techno geek. He studied Psychology at Miami University in Ohio. He comments, *"People fascinate me. Even as a kid, I couldn't understand how people could be so cruel to each other. How they could turn on each other so easily. Friends can switch loyalties in an instant and I've never understood that. I could never understand the nature of rapid betrayal."* I note that it's interesting he went into screenwriting. Alan humorously responds, *"the irony of it right?"*

He is intrigued by the limits of human beings, *"Writing for me has been a way to ask questions and then answer them on the page. Pose a question, suss out the answer, wrestle with it through these characters and then come to a resolution or a catharsis that I'm happy with. It's me trying to figure out people. How will people react in this situation? Who will break? Who will survive? Who will go forward? Who will wither? Who will grow? For me, that's what writing is about."*

### The Social Construction of Screenwriting: It's About Relationship

Those of us who are writers know firsthand the identification with the characters we create. As screenwriters, we have the benefit of creating dialogue and socially constructing situations where characters grow and conflict is resolved. Real life dialogue is not quite as simple and creating a fictional world gives us a chance to say what's on our mind, deal with

less than desirable situations, correct an injustice or explore a new subject without having to live it. That is the case with a new television series on Fox that Alan's working on called *Insomniac*. He relays, *"It's about a female homicide detective in Philadelphia who discovers she has Fatal Familial Insomnia. It's a rare disease where people lose the ability to sleep. They call it familial because it usually runs in families. It's genetic. She loses the ability to sleep. You lose the ability to cry. You stop feeling pain. You start suffering from hallucinations. Dementia."* I thought it sounded like a horrible life and said so.

But somehow I knew that Alan would have a different slant on the story. He notes, *"It's horrible. If you try and take sleeping pills or sedatives you will pass right through REM sleep into a coma and die. Your life expectancy is about 24-months. When this happens to her it makes her see her life and world differently. It actually makes her a better police officer. It allows her to connect with her estranged son. It makes her a better person. It allows her to look back on how she was actually sleepwalking through her career. She would go A, B, C with a case and not really get to where's the justice and truth inside a case. She starts going back to her old cases to resolve what she's unfinished. She discovers all these things about life that she didn't recognize – especially books and movies. She first tries to read books to put herself to sleep. She's reading 'Atlas Shrugged.' She's watching 'The Magnificent Ambersons' thinking it will make her fall asleep and unbeknownst to her – it's interesting. It ends up affecting her police work because she's using these things."* Alan's appreciation of his own life emerges from writing about this character discovering new interests and focus while living with this debilitating disease.

Relationships are complex as a screenwriter. You literally become an advocate and voice for your characters. That is why many screenwriters feel personally violated when studios, directors and even managers start tampering with their version of the story. There is also the dual relationship of those who are shut out of the room when a writer is working on a project. At times, a piece of paper gets more attention than those close to us. Another aspect is the writer's relationship with the public who see the glamour attached to the movie-making industry but fail to understand the time and energy it takes to research, write, and construct a story. Alan humorously notes, *"I don't say (EXAGGERATES VOICE) – I'm a screenwriter – a lot of times because people say – 'oh, you should write my story' and he adds, "It's really funny – I should have saved it on my computer. There's a guy who is a screenwriter who wrote on his blog, 'I will not read your fucking script. It's not that I'm being mean. I just can't do it. I'm working on my own projects. If I spend all this time reading other people's scripts – I'll never work on my own projects.'"*

The relational aspect is apparent when it comes to securing work in the business as Alan describes, *"It's all about relationships. So and so really likes you and wants to talk about such and such. Do you remember them? I've been in this business now for 20 years. I'll be in a meeting and some guy will say 'you probably don't remember me but I brought you coffee when I worked for so and so.'"*

### **'Man and Wife' Inspired By His Wife**

There's no doubt that Alan's primary relationship is with his family. He gives credit to his parents because they used to take him to the drive-in all the time. Alan reminisces, *"I didn't*

*even think about it. Back then The Adromeda Strain, Colossus: The Forbin Project, Westworld, Le Mans, and at seven seeing 2001 and not having a clue what it was about. But it was about. But it was fascinating."*

He acknowledges his wife's efforts in helping to launch his career. Alan says, *"My wife and I moved out to L.A. I gave myself two years to get an agent. I got an agent in six weeks. Actually thanks to my wife who was working as a waitress, which gave me time to write. 'Man and Wife' -- which I just sold -- is really about my marriage. A lot of character stuff in the script is from my own marriage. The little things that people don't realize are important in a marriage. Bringing home roses is one thing -- but actually talk about romance -- empty the dishwasher when you don't have to be asked. I'll put the kids to bed."* Alan reiterates about the importance of the little things in marriage.

His script, *'Man and Wife,'* was recently in his first bidding war. Alan explains, *"You take a script to a number of buyers. What you hope is that Sony will be interested and they'll offer X number of dollars. Another studio will also want the script and basically get you into a bidding war. 'Well, they offered \$300,0000 what are you going to offer? We'll go for 350. Guess what they're going for 350. What are you going to do?' What you hope for is escalation."*

Alan's script *"Man and Wife,"* mentioned in the online *Hollywood Reporter*, courted a mid-six figure bidding war which means that multiple studios are competing for the same property and it inevitably elevates the price. Ralph Winter, producer of Fox's *'X-Men'* is scheduled to produce and of the Akiva Goldsman, who wrote *A Beautiful Mind* and *Cinderella Man*, is attached to direct. Although the plot is under wraps, "the story centers on a professional killer who is forced to pretend to be an ordinary husband, and the wife who learns to love her husband in a totally unexpected way" (<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/nice-couple-fox-mcelroy-108414>),

Alan goes on to talk about their struggles starting out on the screenwriting path. *"Oh my gosh, it was brutal. We drove all the way out to L.A. and that first night we got a little hotel room in Santa Monica. It was a horrible hotel and the walls were paper-thin. There were people next door that were arguing and screaming at each other. We were both sitting there and thinking what are we doing?"*

### **Columbia Pictures Minority Program**

There were not a lot of African American scriptwriters as role models in the late 80's. Alan adds, *"No, One of the things that I thought is that people were not going to judge you by the color of your skin -- but the content of your script. I view that as an advantage. I'd let the work speak for me."*

*"My wife met an actor named James McEachin who suggested I get into a program at Columbia Pictures that was geared toward minority writers. So that's what got me into the program and allowed me to go onto the Columbia lot. I learned how to pitch. Learned about screenwriting. I wrote a treatment. I wrote a script, which helped me to get a better agent. It was called 'Legion' (not the movie about angels). 'Legion' helped me get my first agent. With my agent, I got a dinner meeting with a guy who worked at Geffen films. I pitched him five story ideas. He didn't go for it. I pitched him one more idea -- it's ironic --*

*a one-liner – ‘one man chasing another man through a dying man’s mind.’ He loved it and asked me to write a 9-page treatment for it. It was called ‘Solomon’s Mind.’ That was my first development deal that was February 1987 – and that’s when I began full-time freelance writing.”*

### **The Manager: A Personal Trainer for Story**

In real life, it is hard enough finding time to have substantive conversations. It is even more challenging for a screenwriter to find time to share his or her creative process or fictional story with an outsider. Writing can feel very solitary and it can be a lonely place. An outside perspective or another point of view is critical to helping us see something that we normally would not notice in the script. It is not just that our friend likes the work or we like it – ultimately we want to know that an audience would appreciate our creative efforts. The idea of the solitary artist at work is a myth because in the very act of creation there is a joy that comes from knowing that a future audience would be appreciative of the finished work. Creativity is a vibrant relational process.

Alan’s manager serves a function that is slightly different than an agent whose job is to sell. *“My agent just throws projects at me. This person has a project – that person has a project. My manager says, ‘this project is a waste of time. That person will never come through. This is what you need to focus on.’”* He comments, *“There are a lot of people I know who have a manager and no agent. They trust what their manager is doing and saying. I have a great agent – they do a fantastic job for me. But I can work out stories with my manager.”*

Alan describes how his manager challenged him on the script for *Man and Wife*. He said, *“You really have to think about this specific idea for this character. I fought him for about four months. I didn’t believe in it or see it his way. Then an idea coalesced in my head about this one character and it was what he said. I finally saw what he was talking about and it made the entire script sing. He’s more like my therapist. He’s very smart about story. I don’t think all managers are like him. This guy is great with characters.”*

I was curious whether a lot of scriptwriters have managers? Alan replies, *“I don’t think so. I think it has become a need because the industry has become so hard to get work. You need to have as many people working for you as possible – as many fingers out there searching to find work. It used to be that directors and actors had managers.”*

What I learned from Alan is that the agent is the dealmaker and the manager is a combination of public relations specialist and personal trainer. He notes, *“The agent will throw work your way. The manager helps you to focus and maximize time.”*

### **Originality Replaced With Proven ‘Branded’ Ideas**

Alan talks about the reality of the new entertainment industry. *“It’s brutal. I’m not alone. I have an agent and a manager. My manager says the same thing – that all his clients are struggling because the movie industry has fundamentally shifted. It used to be that the industry needed original ideas. Now the industry is afraid of original ideas and needs everything to be branded. What’s it based on? It’s based on a comic strip, a novel, and many other things. They’re basing movies on View-Master, Battleship. . .”*

Because of the success of movies like *Transformers*, “suddenly all these toy companies like Haboro and Matttel want to build a movie around it,” notes Alan.

### **Middle-class Movie Budgets Also Suffering**

There is an erosion of middle-class moviemaking that mirrors the erosion of the middle class at this point in time because the studio system is financially risk adverse. Alan notes, *“there used to be middle-class movies that got made – usually a character driven mid-budget thriller – the heyday of Michael Douglas films. You don’t see that anymore because those films don’t make money. The cost to open a movie is so high now. The low end is 25-million for prints and ads. People are spending 100% of the budget just in terms of advertising. If the budget is 100-million, they are going to spend 100-million in just advertising. The cost is so high they are not going to make a movie where there’s risk.”*

### **Extreme Filmmaking**

We discuss the high and low extreme filmmaking projects that are getting made. Alan mentions, *“You get \$160-million-dollar movies like ‘Inception’ Chris Nolan is the brand – ‘Dark Knight,’ ‘Batman Begins.’ You’ll have a \$160-million-dollar movie being made – or you have ‘Paranormal Activity’ – You have a movie that somebody made on \$15,000 dollars or a studio made for \$160-million. International financing has dried up so finding money is the hardest thing for an independent.”*

*Paranormal Activity* (2007) was a film made for \$15,000 and the U.S. rights were sold to Paramount/Dreamworks for \$350,000. This film went on to be the most profitable in film history to gross almost \$193,355,800 (worldwide in 21 January 2010). Then you have a more expensive film such as *Inception* (2010) budget at \$160,000,000 and then making over \$825,532,764 (worldwide in 6 January 2011 as noted in the International Movie Database ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com))).

### **The Recycled Story: Explore Public Domain**

The advice is to explore public domain for a project that you can adapt. Public domain projects are those whose intellectual property rights have expired.

I ask if he’s going to explore public domain? Alan replies, *“Yeah, I have a couple of ideas. I was going to find a different way to do the story of Jack and the Beanstalk – a present day version. There are people finding different ways to redo Dracula stories. Dracula is a branded entity so you tell a story and come at it from a different direction.”*

### **You Have To Adapt**

*“You have to be tactical. You have to adapt. As the industry changes, you have to learn how to change with it. A lot of times somebody says, ‘nobody wants to buy Westerns or don’t write a Western.’ That’s exactly the time to write a Western – when nobody else is doing it – it’s time to do that,”* is the advice of Alan McElroy.

Alan recently wrote a script, *“to get myself out of the funk of writing takes, pitches and pages. It is a throwback to the period of heroism. There are distinct bad guys – and in the end the hero wins. It’s pure escapist fun reminiscent of the movie ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark.’*

*It is something where I probably needed to lift my own spirit. As a writer in general, you have to be writing for yourself. When you start writing to suit the industry, it's the tail wagging the dog. You're chasing mist and it's too easy to do. One of the reasons I'm glad I don't live in L.A. is that everybody is talking about the latest development deal or specs for sale."*

## **The 80's Changed The Level of Competition**

The level of competition has substantially increased for freelance. In the late 80's, screenwriters became very powerful. Joe Eszterhas, another Clevelander, was pulling in millions Alan notes, *"there was a backlash because studios did not like the idea of screenwriters having that much power. So they stopped buying everything and put screenwriters in their place. The numbers went way down. The potential for screenwriting brought a flood of screenwriters into the industry."*

## **Packaging a NASCAR Project: Pitching Michael Mann**

*"This Friday I have a pitch with Michael Mann ('Hancock,' 'The Aviator,' 'Collateral,' 'Miami Vice,' and 'Public Enemies') on a project. This is a project about NASCAR. We're trying to lure a director into the project because if you package a director with an actor it is more likely to get put into development when you pitch a studio," notes McElroy. "'Man and Wife' is a rarity. You cannot walk in with a naked project nowadays. You have to package in all of these elements to get it off the group. You want an actor involved, a director – and it's really becoming the only way you can hook in a studio."*

## **Pitching As Performance: Take An Acting Class**

Scriptwriters are the ultimate freelancers. Even if you're on staff, you're always assuming it can end tomorrow. A lot of people think writers or creative types are in a privileged position given that you don't have to sit with the same co-workers day-in and day-out. Alan responds, *"What I love about what I do; I make my own hours. I write when I want. I don't have to get up and schlep to an office by 8 AM. All of those things are great benefits. When there's 12" of snow outside, I don't have to drive to downtown Cleveland. Or, if I'm in L.A., deal with social politics. When I go to L.A., I have to deal with it for a short period, but then I can take off that hat and walk away from it."*

I am curious about how Alan shifts his persona when he visits Los Angeles. He says, *"You have to become that high-energy guy. What I learned when I first came to Los Angeles is that it's not just about the writing. No. Pitching you have to become a performer. So you have to become an actor. I would tell screenwriters to take an acting class -- because you have to learn to present yourself in a meeting. Executives will tell me that great writers will come in who can't tell their own story. Pitching as performance. That's the thing that's not lost in the writing process. People want you to come in, sit across from them and tell you a great story. Transport you. If that happens when you have them and they're in that moment, then you have the job. I did this project called 'Valet.' I originally had to go in and pitch these two executives at Alcon. I'm pitching this project for them and watching them – it's a thriller – I'd reel them into a moment – and watch them react. Literally this one guy would jump in his seat – shocked. Or they'd take a breath – and you know you got them."*

## **The Takeaway: Recognizing The Audience As Relational**

As a screenwriter, I can attest to the fact that the construction of a script is not just about plotting, developing characters, and pitching at meetings. For screenwriters, they are acutely aware that their writing is designed to engage, challenge, excite and surprise an audience – themselves included. The writer definitely enjoys the subliminal undercurrent that drives them to cathartically connect to a subject but there is the relational idea that other folks would find this interesting too. The awareness that we are interfacing with an audience is critical to the success of a screenwriter as we write. Who doesn't want to be surprised, stimulated and delighted in every day life? The screenwriter realizes that telling a good story, with complex characters, and an intriguing plot requires a sophisticated and receptive audience that can relate to and identify with the story.

The great films are not driven by explosions and special effects, but by relatable conversations that bond us to the characters. This does not require perfection or redemption but exposure to their innermost thoughts. The information we glean about the character, through dialogue and body language, sets the stage for caring about their subsequent actions and outcome. It does not matter if the character is good or bad as long as we understand their motivation and can relate to their humanness (e.g. Tony Soprano). The creation of these moments, when our identification is so strong that we are riveted to the screen and momentarily forgetting we are watching a movie, has been described as “film communion” (D. Thomas, 1984).

Academic writing would be more vibrant and accessible if scholars remembered they are engaged in a discourse with an audience. Scholarly work does not have to be devoid of “the otherwise marginalized domains of the psyche: desire, emotion, and bodily sensation” (Gergen, 2007). Click on the following link to access the *Writing As Relationship* article ([http://www.swarthmore.edu/Documents/faculty/gergen/Writing\\_as\\_Relationship.pdf](http://www.swarthmore.edu/Documents/faculty/gergen/Writing_as_Relationship.pdf)).

## **The Takeaway: The Standalone Creative Does Not Exist**

The standalone creative does not exist in film production. Collaboration is vital to success in the media industry. The packaging of multiple talents in the industry (e.g. attaching a director or actor to a script) demonstrates that mutual coordination is essential in this competitive industry. Alan's personal and professional friendships in the industry are what sustain him emotionally and financially.

Alan McElroy, with over 20 years of screenwriting experience, was gracious enough to tell his story. Here negotiations, frustrations, observations, business relationships and new creative approaches are revealed.

## Laura Paglin - Independent Filmmaker





# Laura Paglin

## Appreciative Reflection – Filmmaker

Laura Paglin and I met in '92 or '93 at an Ohio Valley Regional Media Arts Coalition (OVERMAC) where we were both working on our respective film projects. This was a great place to network with other filmmakers. This conference was held at a rustic lodge in Southern Ohio and it was essentially an overnight pajama party for creative adults.

When I moved back to Cleveland, Laura and I would occasionally run into each other and grab coffee. As a member of a small film community, Laura visited my film class at Cleveland State University and here she spoke to students about production (2003).

## Learning and Practicing On Her First Film

What I appreciate about Laura is her persistence and stamina. This fierce determination allowed her to complete an arduous feature-length fictional film shot on super16 (made into a 35-millimeter print) -- *Nightowls of Coventry* (2004). She tirelessly wrote, produced, directed and raised close to half-a-million funding for this film during a ten-year period. Initially, she started this project through an internship-training program developed through the Ohio Independent Film Festival. Watch trailer for *Nightowls of Coventry*: (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FKs6hkFI14>) to get a feel for her work.

*Nightowls of Coventry* captures the changing times at Marv's (Irv's) Deli, which was a counterculture diner we all frequented in Cleveland Heights in the 1970s. Paglin's storyline reads:

Marv, the owner of an old neighborhood Jewish deli, must stay open 24 hours to cater to the new generation of clientele, but straight-laced neighborhood do-gooders want to close him down. Meanwhile inside, hippies, bikers and crusty old Jewish men, caught in the throes of changing times and culture clash, fight over turf and yearn for a waitress to take their orders. (<http://www.nightowlsofcoventry.com/story.php>)

Harvey Pekar, the writer of the underground comic book series with Robert Crumb – *American Splendor*, wrote the words for the film jacket cover (art by Gary Dumm). The following link connects to the film jacket cover and more information *Nightowls of Coventry* website. (<http://www.nightowlsofcoventry.com/>).

The initial attraction to this story was Laura connecting to her Jewish roots, a component of her life that was essentially missing when growing up in Portland, Oregon. When finding herself in Irv's Deli, she was struck by not only how many of the Jewish patrons were reminiscent of family members. She also found herself mesmerized by the diverse, real-life cultural clash of characters. This project wasn't so much a search for identity – but a reconnection with the familial, and perhaps an infatuation with the surreal where cultures and classes intersected in the 70s.

### **Talk to People and Jump In: Collaborate and Improvise**

Admittedly, Laura took the roundabout route to a filmmaking career and that is partially the reason it took so long for her first film project. *“I went to Grinnell College in Iowa – a good liberal arts college. It was an excellent education. Then I went into music, which was a big mistake. I finished my degree. Then I thought I'd teach and work on film projects.”* I was curious why she just didn't study film? She replies, *“it was pre-Internet. I grew up in Portland Oregon in the 1970s. There was a little community that did animations but there was nobody to say to you ‘you ought to go to this school or be an intern on a movie.’ It was just this thing I did – making little animations with my friends in the neighborhood. It was instilled in me that the proper thing to do after high school was to go off to a good liberal arts college. I wasn't sure how to go about pursuing a film career and it never occurred to me to ask people. Nor did it occur to me that it was really something I could pursue as a career. Filmmaking was something I liked but I didn't know what to do with it. Because I lacked life experience, I didn't really have many ideas. Now I realize that if you gravitate towards something, you don't have to know exactly what you want to do. It is part of the discovery and you just need to jump in.”*

Laura jumped in with a feature-length film and got drenched in the filmmaking experience. It was her creative baptism. She notes, *“I just took out books on how to write screenplays. I made all the mistakes they talk about -- all the exposition in the front, not having a plot line figured out. I loved figuring out the theme, the atmosphere and writing lots of dialogue – just could never figure out the plot. I spent years trying to figure out how to write a script. Worse, I picked an ensemble piece, which was more complicated and didn't fit the scriptwriting models I'd read about. Then I had to learn how to write a business plan and start a non-profit (Cleveland Creative Filmmakers 1999) so I could funnel grant funds. I was always scheming.”*

### **Scheming to Dreaming: Relationships Are The Guiding Force**

Words are powerful. The word “scheming,” popularly implying underhanded, then starts a dialogue of “deficit discourse” (Gergen, 1994, p. 143-164). She was engaged in the production process and the relational business of fund raising. “Scheming” discredits the steep learning curve Laura navigated or the production planning she negotiated to make the film a reality. As we unpacked her process, she was positioned with access to affluent people who valued their relationship with her. And though one learns that they valued Laura over the film, one doesn't see her as “exploiting” the situation but rather speaking into the relationship she had to the people with investment power.

She notes, *“Ironically, my piano teaching of ‘over privileged children’ in the suburbs was helpful. I met an influential Cleveland family and they invested in the film and held a donor party. I don’t think they were particularly interested in the film but they liked me as a person and wanted to help.”* “Scheming” is when you pull something over on someone – “dreaming” is when your vision pulls people along with your shared values.

Laura was dreaming and her relationships, providing financial backing, were the guiding force allowing her to complete the film production. Many creative folks feel indulgent for negotiating the deal because they already feel rewarded for following their passion. Laura’s story illustrates how creative individuals can encourage financial contribution in form of participation that allows others to connect to a larger venue.

## **How Do You Put A Price Tag On Passion?**

It takes courage, follow-through, and conviction of your artistic vision to apply for funding. Laura has received many grants and is versed in the funding process. There are plenty of community arts and granting organizations providing funding for community-based venture. Documentarians, like Laura, are also tied into organizations like Independent Television Service (ITVS) (<http://www.itvs.org>) that funds public projects linked to social change, diversity, democracy, and the independent spirit. The Council on Foundations – Film & Video Festival Film is a funding resource site that also showcases films, videos, and television programs that have received support from foundations with the intention of encouraging grantmakers to use media to advance their philanthropic mission (<http://www.fundfilm.org>). The Center for Social Media, although not a funding organization, is a repository for a wealth of information materials related to social public media (<http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org>).

The words “new mutualism,” “altruism,” and “sacred economics” are coming to the forefront in our vocabulary for describing the evolving spirit of cooperative commerce. Websites such as *Reality Sandwich* (<http://www.realitysandwich.com>) and *Evolver* (<http://www.evolver.net>) are interactive forums for topics addressing evolving consciousness and society – especially economic issues examining redistribution, gifting, and philanthropy.

The world is confusing enough with swift technological changes but for artists and freelancers it is more difficult to figure out the marketplace and what role does passion play in the equation? What kind of price tag do you put on art, beauty, pleasure, healing, or working as a change-maker? You can’t exactly outsource that to China. Because value is so hard to determine, inventive solutions are taking shape at rapid speed where artists, change-makers, freelancers, writers are stepping up and asking, “How can we make a difference and make a living?”

Flow Funding is just one example of an organization promoting “adventurous philanthropy, inspired generosity” (<http://www.flowfunding.org>). Started by Marion Rockefeller Weber, who envisioned giving ordinary community leaders the chance to learn first-hand the power of generosity. Although coming from wealth, she was aware that many individuals were inexperienced with philanthropic giving and states:

But it is the way the money moves that distinguishes Weber's idea. Flow Funders receive \$20,000 per year, for three years. They receive no salary and cannot fund their own projects or those of family members. As Weber puts it: 'There would be no salary to do this. This is not a job, but rather an opportunity to practice generosity in the world.' At its core, Weber's philanthropy is in large to teach other to be philanthropic, to stretch people's notion of generosity by, initially, removing lack of resources as a barrier to being generous. In effect, Flow Funding is a process of seeding generosity, trusting that when the money peters out, the generosity will not. The process is built on the notion that the act of giving and serving others changes people. (Slambrouck, 2010, March 29)

Read the online article in the Christian Science Monitor: "[Teaching Others How To Give Money](http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Making-a-difference/2010/0329/Teaching-others-how-to-give-money)" (<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Making-a-difference/2010/0329/Teaching-others-how-to-give-money>).

### **Musical Influence Embedded In Her Projects**

Her musical training, where practice is essential to developing craft, laid the foundation for her tenacity in continuing on film projects when other people would have quit because of the effort it takes to produce and direct a feature-length film. The rhythmic editing process of instinctively picking up on a visual or aural riff that allows for continuity or punctuation of thought energizes her work. This ability to playfully situate dialogue or situations with unusual juxtapositions is familiar to the artistry of jazz musicians:

A transformation occurs in the players development when he or she begins to export materials from different contexts and vantage points, combining, extending, and varying the material, adding and changing notes, varying accents, subtly shifting the contour of a memorized phrase. Combining elements from different musical models, mixing different harmonics and grace notes, extending intervals, and altering chord tones is a metaphorical transfer of sorts (Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990), transferring from one context into another to create something new. (Barrett, 1998, p. 607)

Laura's musicality not only infuses her soundtrack but also sparks the editing process where a memorable or provocative line may thrust the film in another direction. Music is a part of Laura's creative DNA. *Shadow of the Swan: A Composer's Story*, "chronicles the struggles and triumphs of disabled composer Dennis Eberhard, on a trying journey to Russia to premiere his new piano concerto" (Paglin, 2005). Click the link to check the trailer for *Shadow of the Swan* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-VACkhd00M>). In *Men, Women, Angels & Harps*, Laura directs a historical documentary about the *harp's* association with religion and culture hosted by Bill Marx, the son of the Marx Brothers Harpo Marx, which aired on PBS. (Paglin). The following link to *Men, Women, Angels & Harps* ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ynzt11\\_lKiE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ynzt11_lKiE)) provides one with a musical note of her work.

## **The Protection of Intuition: *No Umbrella – Election Day in The City***

The documentary, *No Umbrella – Election Day In The City*, was really an ode to intuition. Laura notes, “During the 2004 election, I went out with my camera and basically stumbled upon this situation. There was talk that Ohio might be the center of another voting fiasco the way Florida was in 2000. I got a call from a documentary crew in New York to see if I could film for them in Cleveland. I was excited and of course said ‘yes’ but then they changed their mind because they didn’t have the budget.” I was disappointed but then I thought, ‘I’ll just cancel my piano lessons for the day and go out on my own.’ I got up and tried to vote early but there was a big long line. I had a list of polling locations and headed downtown. I stopped at a few of the smaller ones and from everything I could see from the outside, it looked like a normal day. I was about to leave but then through, I’ll just check out this library. It was in the Hough neighborhood.” Hough It is one of the roughest areas of Cleveland and Laura replies, “A woman told me “it’s really bad in there. There’s a big, long line and nothing’s moving. People are screaming and yelling” She invited me to come in and it was non-stop filming after that. If this woman hadn’t asked me to come in with my camera – I probably wouldn’t have gone in. The media was actually banned from filming inside polling stations that day. I wish I could find that woman and thank her.”

Laura was in the right place at the right time. She notes, “I knew I had some great stuff – but I’m also thinking ‘everyone’s doing an election documentary’. About six months after the election, I decided to look at the footage. I thought ‘there’s probably not enough here to create a story, but but just for the hell of it, I’ll put together a few minutes so my family in the West Coast to see how crazy it is here.’ Voting is not an issue there. I found a natural beginning spot, put together about five minutes and thought, ‘hmm that’s pretty good, I’ll try another five minutes.’ I put the film together fairly fast. It was pretty easy to edit – that’s the irony. I test screened it for a few critical friends. Everything worked except the ending. That was the main obstacle. Once I had that, I sent it to Sundance on the latest possible deadline thinking, ‘Everyone will have an election documentary - they’ll probably be getting thousands.’”

Laura’s intuition brought her to the polling place in the Hough area of Cleveland that day in the middle of a rainstorm. Once she discovered decent footage, her initial thought was to enter it in Sundance but was hesitant because she assumed everyone would have an election documentary. Again, she followed her intuition and entered despite her personal doubts. This is a highly competitive international film festival and her documentary, *No Umbrella – Election Day in the City*, was accepted as a 2006 Sundance participant (one of 70 short films out of approximately 4000 entries).

Paglin’s synopsis reads:

*No Umbrella - Election Day in the City* is an unblinking look at the 2004 US Election Day failures in one of Ohio's poorest neighborhoods. In the most hotly contested state in the country, gridlock at inner city polls ignites tempers and sets off charges of conspiracy. *No Umbrella* drops us squarely into the chaos as we watch the irascible octogenarian councilwoman (Ms. Fannie Lewis) take on polling place

breakdowns, an unresponsive bureaucracy and an increasingly agitated electorate. (<http://www.noumbrella.org/clips.htm>)

The film won many awards including the Jury Award for Best Short at the Full Frame Festival in Durham, North Carolina and an Audience Award at the Sydney Film Festival. It was acquired by HBO films and aired on Cinemax. Click the following link to view trailer for *No Umbrella -- Election Day in the City* (<http://www.noumbrella.org/clips.htm>)

### **The Rewards of Awards: Sundance, Slamdance and Full Frame**

For documentary filmmakers, the film festivals are arenas where documentary makers, buyers, and aficionados congregate to view, partake of the culture, and make deals. Sundance, Slamdance, and Full Frame are three highly competitive, prestigious film festivals that provide excellent exposure and recognition. The Sundance Institute, started by the actor Robert Redford, “advances the work of risk-taking storytellers worldwide” (<http://www.sundance.org/about/>). Slamdance, an alternative venue “began when a group of cheerful, subversive filmmakers weren’t accepted into the Sundance Film Festival. Unwilling to take ‘no’ for an answer, they instead started their own event - Slamdance: Anarchy in Utah” (<http://www.slamdance.com/>). Full Frame, located in Durham, NC, “serves the documentary form and its community by showcasing the contemporary work of established and emerging filmmakers. The festival provides a space that nurtures conversation between artists, students, and the Full Frame audience” (<http://www.fullframefest.org/about.php>).

Laura heard in November that she got into Slamdance. She says, *“That’s an excellent alternative to Sundance. It’s not Sundance but it runs concurrently and buyers, media and press pay attention to it. Neither festival allows you to be in both at the same time. I heard from Slamdance the Friday before Thanksgiving. The last day to be notified by Sundance was the following Monday. The Slamdance people told me I had to commit by Sunday in order to be in the festival. Needless to say, that made for an exciting but tense Thanksgiving. I hadn’t heard from Sundance on Sunday, so I faxed in my commitment form to Slamdance. I figured I’d made the right decision because all day Monday, I heard nothing from Sundance. Then at exactly 8:00 PM EST, I got the call from Sundance. I thought someone was playing a joke on me so I asked the guy to confirm my acceptance with an email. Then I wrote an apologetic letter to Slamdance.”* I was curious about how that pushed her career? *“It got a lot of buzz for a short film. Nothing really happened immediately. But then I got invited to Full Frame. I’d never heard of them before but they’re a fantastic, really major documentary film festival. One of their sponsors is HBO. It won the big jury prize there. After that, the Sundance Channel wanted it. It’s not like they pay a lot – but I was really happy to have any kind of television distribution and agreed to it. Then I get the call from HBO – ‘We liked your film and would like to talk to you.’”*

### **Distribution: HBO or Sundance?**

*“Then I was worried because I was about to sign a contract with Sundance for distribution,”* notes Laura. *What does that really mean? “They pay you a licensing fee in*

*exchange for the rights to broadcast it for several years.” I ask Laura to reveal more and she says, “for the shorts you’re lucky to have any sort of broadcast. When I got a call from HBO, I had to put off the Sundance Channel. Fortunately they were late in getting the paper work together for the contract. I wanted to get things moving with HBO because I could only put off the Sundance Channel so long. But the woman from HBO said ‘Let’s talk next week so you can think it over.’ I’m thinking ‘I really don’t need to think this over!’ Then she asked, ‘What are your goals for the film?’ For whatever reason I answered, “it’s a long shot – but I’d like to qualify it for an Academy Award.’ She said, ‘I think that’s an excellent idea.’”*

I asked if HBO pays more than Sundance? Laura candidly said, “Yes *almost twice as much and they wanted me to qualify for Academy Award consideration.*” She was having a great time reminiscing about calling the Academy and imitates the woman who answered the phone with a British accent, “Academy – *whom do you wish to speak to?*” Laura acknowledges that film festival awards and getting into top tier festivals does make a difference. She says, “*It’s really hard to get anyone from HBO to look at your material unless you already know someone there. They come to you.*” The recognition from festivals helps when it comes to securing grants or work.

### **Creative Filmmakers Association; Collaboration Is Critical**

Creative Filmmakers Association (CFA), founded by Laura Paglin in 1992, was created to build educational programs and training programs for filmmakers. CFA description reads:

Over the years, CFA has given many young interns their start in the film industry with hands-on training on its production. In the late 1990s, CFA expanded its mission to include the production of marketing videos for corporations and non-profits. Monies generated from the production of marketing videos are used to support CFA’s feature film endeavors and educational programs.  
[\(http://creativefilmmakers.org/home/history/\)](http://creativefilmmakers.org/home/history/)

Collaboration is critical for combating the isolation of freelance. Laura notes, “*It’s more fun to work with other people. I really enjoy it.*” She adds, “*finally, I found a partner to work with me on my current documentary and that’s been great – another vague OVRMAC (Ohio Valley Regional Media Arts Coalition) connection. We’d known of each for years. Finally, we ran into each other at a coffee shop. We’ve been working together. It’s so much more enjoyable. We can laugh when things that go wrong.*”

The Entrepreneurship Preparatory School (E Prep), the subject of Laura’s new documentary project, has a mission to provide an exceptional educational experience for students resulting in admission to a four-year college or university. The environment is technologically advanced, safe, and the clear manifesto is discipline. The Founder, John Zitzner, was a recent guest speaker at the independently organized Ted Event in Cleveland held at the Weatherhead School of Management. His idea was to start a charter school, E Prep, where the entrepreneurial culture places emphasis on perseverance, responsibility, self-discipline, courage, respect, and choosing to see obstacles as opportunities.



Laura Paglin was working on a series of marketing videos showing the culture at E Prep. I was a bit surprised to watch a video where kindergarten students silently walked single file and there is no talking out of turn. The kindergarteners confidently narrate, “we use non-verbal cues so we don’t call out. When you are in the halls – you have hands to the side – zipped lips – and follow the yellow brick road.” The students receive stars, checks, and medals for good behavior and the rewards are given out at a “learning circle” ceremony for kids who did a great job during the week. Click to watch the video short: (<http://creativefilmmakers.org/home/village-prep-scholars/>)

### **“Facing Forward”**

For the last three years, Laura has been chronicling students’ lives at E Prep. *Facing Forward* (2011) (<http://www.facingforwardfilm.com/>), her first feature-length documentary film, follows the life of Tyree Stewart:

. . . a charmer who arrives at E Prep barely able to read but with dreams of becoming a ‘billionaire scientist.’ Laura follows him through the halls as he tries to acclimate to his strict, new environment --- 10-hour school days; no screaming at teachers; a dress code that demands belts, jackets and ties and survive an increasingly chaotic home life. (The title is a reference to the admonishment students receive in detention – head off the table, eyes facing forward). Tyree’s journey is as dramatic and more heart-wrenching because it’s real. (Simakis, 2011, March, 31)

Laura recently (November 2011) returned from a showing at the Heartland Film Festival, which presents “transformative films from around the world that artistically explore the human condition” (<http://www.trulymovingpictures.org/heartland-film-festival/>).

### **Social Documentary: Intimate Intrusion**

When I asked Laura about her latest documentary projects, she said, “My new documentary ‘Eleven’ has to do with the recent serial murders in Cleveland – but from the perspective of the drug addicted women who were his victims.” She confesses, “it’s very hard to approach or interview the families of the victims because they’re going through so much grief and you’re intruding and asking them these tough questions. I know news media people are really good at doing that sort of thing - but if you’re the least bit sensitive, it’s very hard. You feel intrusive. Even with the election documentary, I felt like a real goofball going in to the polling place and filming.” Obviously, there is something Laura enjoys about the process. She adds, “I like meeting people that I would never meet under normal circumstances.” I note that she puts herself in environments that are uncomfortable. Laura replies, “or dangerous. Hopefully, it’s for the greater good or to expose something important.”

### **The Takeaway: The Courage To Try Something Ridiculous**

Although never having produced or directed a feature-length film, Laura did something that she knew was bold by tackling a large project, *Nightowls of Coventry*, with minimal



experience. She noted while discussing the topic of aging and creativity, *“I think younger people are not afraid to try something new – and you can learn from that as well. They have the courage - and maybe the naiveté - to try something ridiculous.”* Laura adds, *“I’ll read about some kids who did ‘such and such’ with a camera and think I’d like to do that. I like being around those kind of adventurous people.”* It occurred to me that Laura exhibited the courage she was describing in younger filmmakers – *“the courage to try something ridiculous.”*

Laura, unknowingly or not, was also “embracing errors as a source of learning” as described in an article on Creativity and Innovation in Jazz and Organizations (Barrett, 1998).

When errors do happen, rather than search for causes and identify responsibility, musicians treat them impersonally; they make adjustments and continue. In this vein, Weick (1990) cites critic Ted Gioia who calls for a different standard for evaluating performance (such as one might find in the evaluation of classical musical performance), Gioia calls for the need to evaluate courageous efforts. (Barrett, 1998)

Laura’s heroic journey to try something new requires courage and the ability to use mistakes as a prescriptive course correction and a source of learning.

### **Takeaway: Storytelling – Revealing The Invisible**

The documentary process can be long and tedious. I asked Laura what sustains her and she replies, *“telling stories that normally wouldn’t get told. Showing the world something they wouldn’t normally see. Exposing a problem. Sharing a character from a different walk of life. Like meeting Fannie Lewis”* (councilwoman from Cleveland).

Our conversation is coming to a close. Laura is going to meet a woman who escaped Anthony Sowell – the infamous Cleveland serial killer who lured women to his home. She says, *“we’re making the film from the perspective of the women he murdered. A lot of people dehumanize these women and dismiss them. We’re trying to explore that by talking to their family members as well as the women who escaped. Some of these women feel guilty for surviving. It’s been a difficult project because we’re also competing with news media and often people don’t understand our motivations.”*

Laura Paglin’s storytelling is compelling and inspirational because she gives voice to people whose stories are rarely heard or seen. She beautifully reveals the invisible by bringing their struggles, hopes and dreams to life.

## Ayad Rahim – Journalist and Blogger



# Ayad Rahim

## Appreciative Reflection – Writer, Radio Host, and Blogger

Ayad Rahim and I met in a Middle Eastern history course at Ohio University in Athens. At the time, I was married to a Palestinian man and wanted to know more about the culture. Ayad migrated from Baghdad to Cleveland in 1971 at the age of nine. As Clevelanders, we had a lot in common. We bonded over coffee and have been friends for 25 years. He studied history and political science as an undergrad, and journalism in graduate school. Ayad assisted author Kanan Maklya on his book *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising and the Arab World* (1993). It was a groundbreaking book, which juxtaposed the cruelties in Iraq and the Arab world, against the reactions of Arab intellectuals -- essentially, their silence to those cruelties, thus acquiescing to them. He contributed to the book *Iraq Since the Gulf War: Prospects for Democracy* (1994) and the report *Crimes Against Humanity: The Transition from Dictatorship to Democracy in Iraq*. In addition, Ayad was research coordinator at Harvard's Iraq Research and Documentation Project for four years. He's also published work in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *London Guardian*, and *Jewish Quarterly* while writing extensively about the Middle East.

One can get a sense of Ayad by viewing a video of him as a panelist at Case Western Reserve University Law School where he is providing powerful, candid personal context about the atrocities committed against Iraqis and the subsequent media coverage of the trial of Saddam Hussein, after his ouster from power. The video is lengthy, but worthwhile to hear Ayad passionately exposing the brutality of Saddam Hussein -- from chemical warfare cocktails to ecocide. Click the following link to watch the panel video (September 2009, featured 9:07 minutes in) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcLrxBBHUoA>).

Ayad discusses his freelancing arrangement with *The New York Times* blog "Day to Day in Iraq" (2006). He notes, "I was one of four participants. That blog was because I went to Baghdad for six months in '04 and '05 and I had a blog going called 'Live from Baghdad.' The only thing we lined up before were reports for the Fox affiliate in Cleveland. I was doing them weekly. They paid \$200 each time. I was doing five-, 10-minute reports for them by phone. Each phone call was \$200. It was good because I was there in a local office. I did some things for the local NPR affiliate, but it wasn't paid. Those were the only things we lined up ahead of time. The Philadelphia Inquirer picked up something from my blog -- 'Live From Baghdad.' They paid a little bit. I have so much material, that I wanted to convert it into a book or two. I was so immersed in the blog -- I poured my heart out."

As a political commentator with insightful observations and analysis, Ayad's voice can also be experienced by reading his blog "Live From Baghdad" (2004 -- 2005): (<http://ayadrahimtriptoiraq.blogspot.com>), during part of which he worked from the offices of the Iraqi Foundation. Later, after returning to the United States, he was also part of a

collective voice of commentators in The New York Times blog “*Day to Day in Iraq*” (2006): (<http://daytodayiniraq.blogs.nytimes.com/author/ayad-rahim/>). There is a reflective blog-post in this section about his move to the United States with his family. Here he mentions the tragic poisoning death of his aunt with thallium in 1980 by the Saddam regime, the first such case confirmed by Amnesty International. Click the following link to read “*My Story: A Life In and Out of Iraq*” (2006): (<http://daytodayiniraq.blogs.nytimes.com/2006/05/17/an-introduction-my-life-in-and-out-of-iraq/>).

He had a weekly radio program, *The Ayad Rahim Show*, 2005–2007, at John Carroll University (WJCU), which was about 9/11 and the Arab world, and for which he interviewed numerous guests about 9/11, the Arab World, Islam, terrorism and Iraq. Guest included Dr. Fouad Ajami, Lebanese American scholar and writer; Geraldine Brooks, an old friend and Pulitzer Prize winner; Christopher Hitchens, who discussed the left, today’s ‘antiwar’ camps and anti-Semitism; Adeed Dawisha, native of Iraq and professor of political science at Miami University, who talked about the identity of Iraq and the 2005 Iraq elections; Michael Scharf, professor of law at Case Western Reserve University, who worked for the UN and trained members of the Iraqi Special Court for the Saddam Hussein trial; Dr. Laurie Mylroie, about 9/11 and the 1993 attempt to blow up the World Trade Center towers; and other commentators. Although the show is no longer airing, he plans to turn the interviews into a book.

### **Resistant to Authority: I Don’t Work Well With Others**

Ayad is asked how he landed on the freelance path? He laughs and says, “*I guess I don’t work well with others.*” Ayad adds, “*I prefer to be on my own. I’m resistant to authority. I’ve worked in offices, but I remember when I worked in Washington at the ADC (American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee) – that was when I left OU (Ohio University) and before I finished up my program – they recruited me to work there.*”

He worked in Jerusalem for a year and a half for one Palestinian newspaper. Ayad notes, “*I went there as a tourist after Athens (Ohio and Washington). Al-Fajr, Arafat’s English weekly – and then at the same time I worked with two or three Israeli groups, all anti-Zionist – they are affiliated with Palestinian organizations – the PFLP and the DFLP; and I also worked with the Palestinian Media and Communications Center, which belonged to the Communist Party.*” Admittedly, it was not freelance. He reveals, “*No, I was employed with the Palestinian newspaper and the two Israeli groups. I was doing some translation work. It helps being bilingual – English and Arabic.*”

### **Freelance Is Difficult to Define: I had Three Part-time Jobs**

Ayad left Jerusalem in January 1991 (a few days before the U.N. deadline for Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait) and moved to London, where he later started working with Kanan. He notes, “*Kanan – who was an architect and writer – I met in Jerusalem in October ’90. I later helped him with his book ‘Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising and the Arab World’ – that came out in ’93 (W.W. Norton). A great book. He had a friend there [in Jerusalem] with whom he went to school at MIT – Emmanuel Farjoun was his best friend – and one of the top theoretical mathematicians in the world. Kanan was an architect writing a book on Arab cities, and he thought he was the only Iraqi there. I met Kanan at Emmanuel’s place. We spent a lot of time together. What I didn’t know is that Kanan had previously written a book called ‘Republic of Fear,’ that he wrote under a pseudonym about*

*Iraq. He hadn't disclosed his identity. After Saddam had invaded Kuwait, he came out with the fact that he had written 'Republic of Fear.' In '91, I was doing my tour in America – Boston, New York, Washington, Cleveland, and doing anti-war speaking. I spoke with Kanan, and he said something good can come out of it. Later, after the Iraqi uprising against Saddam (in March of '91), Kanan asked me to help him on a new book." Although paid a monthly salary with Kanan, Ayad also started freelance and notes, "The first thing I wrote was for a Jewish Socialist magazine through Teresa (girlfriend). We were big leftists."*

### **Attributes His Freelance Career to The Luck of the Iraqi**

Ayad Rahim discusses his path to freelance and it jogs his memory. *"That reminds me. There's a group of freelance journalists in Cleveland. They asked me how did you get published in 'The Wall Street Journal.' I said the first thing is you become Iraqi (LAUGHS). I guess it's sort of luck that I was born into an Iraqi family."* Although Ayad moved to the United States at the age of nine, he is steeped in both cultures. He adds, *"It just so happens that Iraq has been center-stage for twenty years, and I have lived the life – and also studied Iraq for all these years. So I was working with Kanan, assisting on the book. Initially, the idea was to split the book. I was to work on the testimonials and eyewitness reports. He was to do the commentary, analysis and interpretation. It ended up that he wrote the whole thing and I worked as his assistant."*

Before that, *"I went in May '91 to the Turkey border, when there was the mass exodus of Kurds, after Iraqis rose up against Saddam. My brother went too – before me. He was a photographer. When I got back, Teresa said Kanan called for me. I helped on the book. After the book, we did a report submitted to the U.N., on crimes against humanity."* From 1991 until recently, his journey was primarily focused on Iraq and the Arab world. Now he has chosen to focus on change in America.

### **Overseas Reporting; From Radical Leftie to Conservative**

I ask what advice he would give a freelance journalist? Ayad says, *"Try as much as possible to line up things before you go."* He was one of the early bloggers. Ayad adds, *"I was – I saw somewhere listed as one of the top conservative blogs in the country."* He caught my incredulous look and I commented, *"And we'll be discussing how you went from. . ."* Ayad completing my thought, *". . . from radical leftie to conservative."*

### **Leaving the Tribe: Breaking Up With Palestinians and Arabs**

Ayad explains why he left Jerusalem, *"I started my split with Palestinians and Arabs when I was there. In hindsight, I was a warrior for the Arab tribe throughout my life. Of course, I was in Jerusalem working with Palestinians. In 1980, Saddam hanged the Iranian-British journalist Farzad Bazoft, and Palestinians were actually cheering Saddam on. And in May of '90, Saddam threatened to burn half of Israel. I remember I was in a friend's apartment when I saw that, this woman Najat, who worked as a nurse in Hadassah Hospital's bone marrow cancer unit (ENTHUSIASTICALLY) was, like, all right."* The nurse was an Israeli Palestinian from Galilee. Ayad adds, *"Seeing all these Palestinians around me – they knew I was Iraqi – I walked across the city, through the Old City, every day – we lived in the Armenian quarter – I'd stop, every morning to get juice, have some hummus. So people would always ask me when is Saddam going to send his 'binary' – the chemical weapons were called 'the binary weapons.' In Gaza, they were calling the long loaves of bread*

*'Saddam's rockets' – I'd go to Gaza once month. I'm walking through the market in Jerusalem, they would call out to me, 'Saddam, Saddam!' I would say, 'I have nothing to do with that criminal – that butcher.' That's when I started to split."* This was the start of the philosophical shift from the left.

## **Changing Context, Shifting Identity**

Ayad had no illusions about the reality of Saddam Hussein. He says, *"While Arabs saw him as their Bismarck, who was going to unite the Arabs against Israel, against America. Saddam was a ruthless brutal dictator. Iraqis knew who Saddam was. Then of course he invaded Kuwait."* That is when the split deepened? Ayad agrees, *"Then when he said I'd trade Kuwait for the West Bank and Gaza – I was still in the swirl of Arab hysteria. It was excitement (PAUSES). It's what's been happening in the Arab world. So I thought at least something good might come out of it for the Palestinians. I was part of the Arab delusion. I didn't think it would come to blows between America and Iraq. The January 15 deadline in 1991 was approaching, and we saw the writing on the wall. My parents and Teresa's parents were pressuring us to get out. We thought, okay, we'd go to Egypt for a few days, while it blows over, and then we'd go back."*

## **Israeli Arabs Have More Freedom Than In the Rest of the Arab World**

Ayad notes, *"A cousin [in Iraq] was getting engaged to be married, and mom was going, and one of my sisters. My goal was Palestine. I was going to quit my work in Washington, and go to Jordan and to Palestine. That was my Valhalla. I went to Iraq that summer, and made another trip in December of '89, after I started working in Jerusalem. I would tell people in the office in Jerusalem, you have it great here compared to Iraq. So I started seeing the reality for myself. Arabs in Israel have it better than Arabs anywhere in the Arab world."*

I was surprised by that comment and asked him to explain, because when I visited the West Bank soldiers were everywhere. Ayad says, *"They're within controlled limits – but they're free to work, to speak their mind. They have a lot of freedoms – even on the West Bank, they have it better than anywhere else in the Arab world."* I ask if the rest of the Arab world is that repressed? Ayad responds, *"Absolutely. Basic human freedoms -- to be able to talk, produce art, read, write, create, travel, move -- are limited. Iraq was the worst. Then Syria and Libya. Jordan and Kuwait are better. What I saw, in contrast to Iraq, was that Palestinians had it great. So I would tell them that. I remember coming back from the '89 trip and coming back to the Palestinian newspaper and told them that."*

## **Truth is a Social Construction: It is Always Someone's Version of the Truth**

As an Iraqi and American, Ayad thought the Palestinians living in Israel were oblivious to the brutality and tyranny of Saddam and misguided in their opinion of him as a great liberator of Arabs. Ayad had no illusions about the reality of life under Saddam and thought his Palestinian coworkers were delusional. This is when Ayad started to shift from taking a pro-Palestinian position.

When there is a contextual change, a person's identity starts to shift. In Ayad's case, his version of the "truth" was based on the social construction of having relational insider knowledge about the cruelty of Saddam. I can only speak of Ayad's recognition of the major identity plot-points where he was changing. There is an assumption that he also

provided an alternative viewpoint to his fellow coworkers at the newspaper in Jerusalem even though they may not have been receptive at that time. The ability to be heard requires mutual coordination with others and an openness to listen to a dialogue that may be profoundly different.

Although dialogue has the potential to reach across borders and to heal world conflicts, Ken Gergen admits that “languages of science faith, personal experience, divine illumination, reason and so on, all function to protect, sustain, and expand particular traditions. Discourses of ‘is true,’ ‘is real,’ ‘is moral,’ and the like, all have the capacity to drive wedges between people” (Gergen, 2009, p. 370).

Yet there is increasing evidence that discord can be bridged with dialogue. There are many interesting initiatives here and overseas that are sponsoring transformative discussions that bring people together. When I lived in Los Angeles over a decade ago, *the Cousins Club* was a forum where Arab and Jewish conversations were taking place. The *Center for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking* promotes open dialogue between Jews and Palestinians with clear guidelines for active listening. Click the following links to access websites: The Center for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking ([http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/rjp/Arab\\_Palestinian\\_Jewish\\_Project/default.asp](http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/rjp/Arab_Palestinian_Jewish_Project/default.asp)); Another interesting program is the *Compassionate Listening Project*: (<http://www.compassionatelisting.org/delegations/israel-palestine>).

The evidence of change is through individuals willing to sit down, to try and bridge divides, and to hear from the heart. Having taught documentary film over the years, I am amazed at the multiplicity of stories that come from a deep, personal place. These documentarians construct powerful narratives in the hope that the kernels of “truth” can sprout change. I am always careful to remind students that documentaries are not necessarily “the truth” – but someone’s version of “the truth.” -- and that’s the truth on truth.

### **Shaping the Context: 9/11 Was About Arab Fascism and Not About Islam**

Ayad is not a supporter of President Obama, to say the least, and dislikes his politics. I ask, “*Do you feel as though he’s not a supporter of the Arab world?*” He responds, “*In his way he is, because he’s a ‘Third Worldist,’ as I was. You remember how I was. I’d run around with the Commies, Palestinians, and the Kenyans – they hate the English more than anyone in the world, except, possibly, the Irish.*”

Ayad simplifies the Third Worldist perspective, and explains their position, “*that the First World has stolen and exploited the Third World’s resources and cheated them out of what is rightfully theirs. It is also the way the Arabs feel. Our proper role in the world – and what’s taught in Arab schools and media – is that we are the perfect people, and the fact that we have fallen, is not our fault. Somebody has done it to us. That’s how they blame everybody else for their problems. Those ‘other people’ are the ones that have exploited us and usurped our power in the world. The only way we can get back up from our pitiful position is to bring them down, and even teach them a lesson, too – to humiliate them, like they’ve humiliated us. That’s what 9/11 is about. It’s an Arab thing. This fixation on Islam is way off. This is the latest incarnation of Arabs’ attempt to get back up. It’s specifically Eastern Arab – a part of the world bounded by Egypt to the west, Iraq to the east, Syria to the north, and Saudi Arabia/Yemen in the south. Pakistan is its own case, for its own peculiar reasons. The Iranian regime is also its own case. Roya Hakakian, the great Iranian*

*Jewish writer, says, 'The Iranian regime tried to Arabize Iran, and they've failed.' That's similar to Third World issues. The First World has exploited us and stolen our resources and brains. It's part of the 'redistribution of wealth.'"*

## **The Psychology of Blame Is Unhealthy; Imagining Another Scenario**

Ayad feels strongly about Arabs accepting responsibility for their conditions. He adds, *"Arabs are responsible for their world, just as we all are. As individuals and societies, we are responsible. My political journey coincides with my personal journey. I started psychotherapy in '93. I used to blame my mother, and I got it out of my system. I'm through blaming my mother and blaming America – and America takes the place of the father. 9/11 is a product of the Arab world. But this view that there is someone to blame for our problems is all over the world."* Ayad's radio show was an attempt to have multiple viewpoints and voices emerging from the Middle East, instead of the endless cycle of destructive blaming. There are many ways to peaceful transformation, but a starting point is through active listening and engagement.

## **In Search of a New Tribe; From Detribalization to Retribalization**

I asked about his transition from a position on the far left to a more conservative stance. Ayad notes, *"I realized later that I was a warrior for the Arab tribe. I've pretty much detribalized myself. Maybe I'm a member of the American tribe now. I hope I've gone from tribalism to being an individual. I've seen this among Iraqis and Arabs all my life. Arab culture is very communally based and tribal. The individual does not have much of a role. The tribe takes care of you. You have to accept the brutality of the tribe, along with the security. You are protected and taken care of by the tribe. But you forfeit your individuality. The tribe supports you, and your family supports you. We'll marry you, put you in school, and find you a job. You forfeit your individual freedom, and I prefer my freedom."* He adds, *"I don't think I started identifying myself as really American until I was in my thirties."*

Freelance is also a detribalization process of changing the focus from "one" significant work tribe to having the ability to enter many tribes (retribalization), organizations, and services that need your expertise and vice versa. Although your loyalty as a freelancer is to the people or organization you are working with at the time, you are a visitor and not required to adopt the culture. Instead you must develop a tangential understanding of the culture and what they are about in a relatively short period of time. This requires the ability to quickly observe, assess, analyze and intuitively perceive your particular role or contribution to this newfound tribe you are entering. Freelance is akin to having a tribal "green card" where you can enter a new tribe, collaborate, and if all goes well hopefully return. Seth Godin describes in his TED talk that the power of the Internet has allowed for an emergence of nontraditional tribes with common goals, interests, and something worth changing – a movement lead by ordinary citizens with extraordinary reach and vision. Clickto watch TED video from Youtube.com February, 2009: ([http://www.ted.com/talks/seth\\_godin\\_on\\_the\\_tribes\\_we\\_lead.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/seth_godin_on_the_tribes_we_lead.html)).



## **The Takeaway: From Occupying a Unique Perch to Leaving The Cage; Our Identity Is Always Shifting**

We are all migrants at many times in our life – entering a new culture whether it is a school, country, and neighborhood or even meeting ideas that are foreign to what we have previously encountered. As a giant socially constructed cell, our permeable membrane allows multiple and sometimes conflicting ideas, experiences and relational encounters to enter our being and change us. As relational beings, we are a fluid, ever-changing work in progress.

Ayad Rahim's journalistic senses allowed him to observe, capture and chronicle his Middle Eastern sojourn. He occupies a unique perch straddling American and Middle Eastern cultures. Ayad, when younger, saw himself as a "*warrior for the Arab tribe*" and later resented the many Arabs who rallied behind Saddam Hussein. Ayad knew firsthand the ruthlessness Saddam Hussein wielded in Iraq – from terror to genocide and ecocide – nothing and no one was safe.

In Ayad's narrative we can see how one takes in ideas and lets them percolate – tossing out old viewpoints, finding something new, inviting other thoughts in, and how one learns to create a space with multiple and often competing ideologies and roles. Ayad's work as a journalist allowed him to chronicle the details of Saddam Hussein's abuse of power. It is an arduous task, reporting on harsh circumstances and telling the stories of those who have been silenced through fear and retribution. Vivien Burr, examining social construction, suggests that absorbing multiple ideologies is complicated and notes:

. . . First of all, ideologies are not coherent, unified systems anyway, but always (at least) two-sided and as such do not present a 'story' that can be lived out in this way. And second, the nature of human beings is such that our very thinking processes involve us in the debate, argument, weighing up pros and cons and so on. In this account, human beings are not like sponges, soaking up ideas from their social environment, but are rhetoricians, arguers, people who are constantly engaged in exploring the contrary implications of ideas. The person here is an active thinker, someone capable of exercising choice and making decisions about the strengths and weaknesses of her or his society's values and ideas. (Burr, 1995, p. 85)

Social construction is not just about what we learn from others, but what we can leave behind. Ayad is creating a space for other interests and activities to emerge. Recently, we had a conversation and he mentioned his new regime of reading the classics, staying away from the news, and curtailing his involvement with Middle Eastern politics. He found himself happier by avoiding the negativity. That's one way to go about it.

Or, he can create a new narrative without having to remove himself. Imagine what kind of rich story would emerge if he was to ask Iraqis to talk about their hopes and dreams for the future? The only thing more compelling than reinventing our own story – is how to challenge our discourse so we can build a better scenario together. Unfortunately, Ayad did not ask me to rewrite his story. I totally intervened. Now he needs to write his own story.

**Steven Tatar – Designer, Creative Director, and Entrepreneur**



# Steven Tatar

## **Appreciative Reflection – Designer, Creative Director and Entrepreneur**

Steven Tatar and I have known each other for around fifteen years. When I moved back to Cleveland in the mid-90s, I was a single parent with a three-year-old daughter and freelancing at the time. Steven was creative director of American Greetings when I first queried him about writing opportunities. Although he left American Greetings shortly after that call, I freelanced at the e-commerce firm MarchFIRST where he reemerged as the Creative Director.

His edgy, yet pragmatic design skills traverse multiple disciplines -- art directing, branding, architecture, sculpting, place-making, and entrepreneurship. His roles have included leadership, teambuilding, and creative management for major corporations and development projects. If I were developing a new or existing business, he would be the first person to call for an unusual, intelligent approach. For his website, visit: (<http://www.steventatar.com>). As a self-employed independent contractor, he has hired freelancers and now operates in the entrepreneurial realm as the driving force of a new, old vintage knitwear company – Ohio Knitting Mills. Click on the following site: (<http://www.ohioknittingmills.com/>).

For our interview, we are sitting in a 3,000 square foot industrial space built around 1890. The building has morphed from a stable into a machine shop, then converted to a train car maintenance station, and now is the headquarters from Steven's newly branded company *Ohio Knitting Mills* that is situated in a rough area of Cleveland. I have a hard time concentrating because I am distracted by a fabulous, colorful collection of vintage sweaters from 1947 to 1974.

As we are talking a delivery guy brings the first copies of his new book, *The Ohio Knitting Mills Knitting Book: 26 Patterns Celebrating Four Decades of American Style* (Tatar with Grollmus, 2010) which is his homage to vintage knitwear and industrial design. As I write an appreciative reflection of Steven's journey -- from discovering this hidden gem of a company, to rebranding Ohio Knitting Mills, and then seeking production partners for reproducing a line of vintage clothing in the heartland – I can't help but marvel and relate to this story of entrepreneurial reinvention that is so distinctively, positively American and hopeful.



Figure 1: Steven Tatar's book cover *The Ohio Knitting Mills Knitting Book* (2010)

## Team Building and Fostering the Creative Process

As a freelancer, you want to work for someone like Steven because he creates an innovative and inspirational environment that values your creative contribution. In brainstorming sessions with a team, he is energetically wielding colorful markers and writing hieroglyphics that playfully show linkages and connections while diagramming potential creative strategies. He's the cool, smart kid that everyone wants to sit next to at lunch, but he doesn't know it – and that's his charm.

Steven discusses his teambuilding process, *"I know how to do discovery and create a culture and process of inquiry that both articulates opportunities - and secondarily is able to make visible customer problem solving. That's not necessarily dependent on being a Web expert. That's a different type of design process. That's what I learned at American Greetings. . . For me, it's about being intuitive and about being empathetic, compassionate and – ironically when I was younger I was in psychoanalysis at the insistence of my parents. It did train me to understand and have an empathetic understanding of the human condition – and understanding of why people behave the way they behave. Organizations as far as I'm concerned are just big humans. They're multi-headed individuals – but they're humanistic beings – organisms – all these cells but they behave as a human psyche."*

## Creative Folks Are The Currency

As a freelancer, he made it clear that all creative contributions were highly valued when working on projects. I also knew that he cared enough about the quality of work so it would look great and be well received. Steven comments, *"The integrity and quality were going to be good. I value that. It's important for me a collaborator – whether it's friendship or professional – it's important that I'm being valued for my contribution. I know that when I manage a team and bring people into a process – they are a full member and an important member – and their point of view is heard and recognized. That's very satisfying to them and goes a long way. Creatives are the most cost-effective resource out there because all you have to do is respect, admire, appreciate them and celebrate them – and they'll give you their first born kids and then some. That's the currency of that realm."*

## Becoming A “Macher”

I’m sitting in an oversized chair. Steve reveals, *“You’re sitting in my grandfather’s chair from the 1930s or 40s.”* His grandfather, Irving Stone, started American Greetings. Steven is very proud of his family and notes, *“he was a ‘macher,”* which is a Yiddish term for maker. As Steven adds, *“The family legacy of being the family the makers, the builders of industry, has been very formative. I’ve always had a lot of admiration for it and have an identity. It’s kind of my destiny to do the same. It’s my job. More than anything this is how I got into design – American Greetings. My exposure to design was not through art school. When I was in art school at the Institute (Cleveland) in 1985 – I was in glass and was a fine artist working in craft media and glass making sculpture. I hadn’t really looked at design or had an understanding of visual communications. The whole realm of using design as a methodology and process to communicate to an audience or a point of view was not in my vocabulary. I didn’t have a typical entre into that realm. . .*

*. . . When my grandfather recruited me I was in New Mexico. The truth was I was married and had a kid and a pregnant wife and we were living pretty well. Even though I was in my late 20s, I was doing all right. I was having shows all around the country as a working artist. I was showing with the big boys. Kind of like a bench sitter in the Triple A or major leagues. In 91 or 92, there was a little recession. The art market was superheated in the 1980s. There was so much stupid money going around. Without realizing it – I was feeding at the trough of the junk bond market. When the economy stalled – art markets really hit the wall. At that point, I’d make work and sell it quickly. When that stopped, the galleries wouldn’t pay me or they wouldn’t get paid by their customers. I had a mortgage – I had kids – where was the money? And that’s when I came to Cleveland – I had a real job.”* The phrase “real job” will be explored in the psychology chapter.

Steven was not hired at American Greetings for his design sensibility. He adds, *“He hired me because he wanted his family to work for him and he wanted me to head the creative. The reality is that it’s a 2-billion dollar business and we’re going to do 120,000 pieces and it has to sell at a certain sell-through and time. From the get go, I always saw design as this process and recognize design as a powerful tool for achieving business opportunities and goals.”* Learn about American Greetings history click on next link (<http://corporate.americangreetings.com/aboutus/history.html>).

## Creating A Creative Community Wherever You Are

He was also mourning leaving a creative community near Spruce Pine – northwest of Asheville. Steven reminisces, *“what a great community. Penland School is where I discovered what being part of a creative community really is. It’s very inviting and thinking about your creative questions – the conditions or the requirements or the circumstances for success as a freelancer. You use the word ‘freelancer’ and in my mind I use the term ‘independent creative.’ In my mind – more than anything else it’s about community. It’s about having the benefit – emotional, the professional, and sometimes even financial as a reflection of oneself. It’s about the creative process – that noise in your head – not between you and yourself – but amongst people who resonate with me is the single most important element.”* Steven expands the vision of creativity from an individual orientation to one that incorporates community as part of a socially constructed process.

The idea of a creative individual as a lone, inspired genius imbued with almost mystical

powers is a carryover of the 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic tradition – and continues to this day. Psychologist Ken Gergen reveals:

As Frank Barron sees it, this view of genius carries with it the metaphor of Genesis, or God the creator. Thus, the praise we accord to creative genius, the sense of awe that we sometimes experience, is subtly equivalent to an act of worship. Inspiration carries traces of the Divine. This romantic view finds a home within the modernist context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More specifically, with its emphasis on continuous progress, modernist culture grants accolades to creative innovation. (Gergen, 2009, p. 91)

This deification of the creative genius (e.g. Steve Jobs) eclipses the socially constructive process of creativity where others work to co-create, research, design, move the vision forward and share the experience with an audience or consumer.

### **The Dot.com Tanking Was Our Subprime Fiasco**

Steven discusses his freelance path, *“When MarchFIRST threw me overboard and the company went down in flames and the dot.com bubble tanked. I was one of hundreds of thousands of people when the dot.com tide went out real fast and we were all stranded.”*

The creative industries were all affected and it was quite a fall given the abundance of freelance website development work in the late 90s. I remember billing \$80 – 100 dollars an hour (that was over ten years ago).

Steven notes, *“The creative industries were all in such demand and were so hot at the time. It was our Woodstock. I was recruiting for American Greetings and going to art schools. The schools were complaining that so many students – particularly the graphic designers – the tech kids, the animators – they couldn’t hang onto them. These second year students were sophomores and were off to L.A., Orlando and New York making 50, 60, 70, and 80 thousands a year –starting.”*

### **Managing A Cacophonous, Chaotic, Entropic, Multi-headed – Cluster Fuck Of An Organization**

Steven became a freelancer, *“When MarchFIRST went under.”* He adds, *“I was meeting all kinds of people who were getting these salaries and jobs titles – whereas at MarchFIRST they didn’t know shit – none of us did. They were tasked with creating the new paradigm – the brave new world – but they didn’t know anything about the world. I remember at MarchFIRST having colleagues, creative directors that were so immature – that were so poorly suited to managing a cacophonous, chaotic, entropic, multi-headed, cluster fuck of an organization.”*

He adds, *“I had a little more maturity and original discipline having been at American Greetings. I didn’t know it at the time. I thought American Greetings was stodgy, boring, unimaginative, uncreative and risk adverse. I didn’t appreciate the fact that it had a lot of humanity and frankly was a rather mature organization. It was much more so a nurturing and professional environment that developed people in a healthy way for responsibility, change, ownership and leadership. Whereas the dot.com world, man – you just call yourself what you want – print your cards – go see a V.C. at breakfast – get the check at lunch and start buying a ton of fancy office furniture – running around the country on*

*impulse and whim – meeting people in airports all the time – they’re the chief fill-in-the-blank officer of some company that sounds like an African word – and I didn’t know what the company did or what it was for and I thought I must really be dumb. I must be so old and out of it. I meet this guy and I say I don’t know what it’s about but it sounds cool. I couldn’t possibly describe what he did – and neither could he.”*

According to the writer Henry Miller, “Confusion is a word we have invented for an order which is not yet understood” (Miller, 1938/1961). Miller’s description captures the messiness of the creative process. Although brainstorming can appear chaotic, there is a new life form emerging and the structure is shaped with discipline, coordinated efforts, and an overarching vision. Innovation and invention involves elements of chaos – but also coordinated action.

## **Ohio Knitting Mills: From Freelancer to Entrepreneur**

Steven comments on the freelancers in this economic downturn, *“We are the tail that the dog wags. Freelancers are absolutely dispensable and disposable commodities. Particularly now – and it’s such a sellers market for jobs right now.”* He made the logical transition from freelancer to entrepreneur and I think that is where many freelancers are heading. After all, we have the wherewithal to help launch other people’s business. Why not our own? Steven comments, *“I was forced to do that. The reality is that I never hung out a shingle ‘Steven – Creative or Designer.’ It’s always been me out and about networking and seeing what’s going on. I see there’s an opportunity for XYZ and I’m the guy to do it. Part of the process or game there is to i.e. convince the client that I can help your needs. That’s what I do.”*

Ohio Knitting Mills is a full-circle creative branding enterprise that Steven discovered, created packaged – and Steven adds, *“raised the money, opened the showroom, swept the floors, greeted the customers.”* I wondered how he found this stash of amazing vintage sweaters and he replies, *“I was actually looking for some steel – I needed a high beam to run a trolley on it so I could pick up a heavy mold without hurting my back – and setting it in a heating oven. I was snooping around for some material-handling stuff. I was also asked to find a location for the annual meeting of the Mid-Town Cleveland development team. They were having their annual meeting and they wanted to go to a downtown hotel. I said ‘why don’t we keep it in the hood?’ Somebody mentioned that the Ohio Knitting Mill had a lot of space. They sold and they’re moving out of the building. I walked in and there were these old knitting machines in operation still knitting. There were thousands and thousands of cones of yarn. They were in the process of packing it up and shutting it down. But they were still running out a few contracts and orders. There was a skeleton crew of about a dozen people at the max. It was clearly on its way down. There were whole floors that were empty. The vibe was so real. It was old school. I met Gary. He was the guy whose hands weren’t dirty and was telling people what to do. I said this is really incredible. I said, ‘where am I and who is this?’”*

*“The sweaters weren’t out – they were in storage. They were knitting plain solid color tubes and acrylics for blankets. I didn’t see amazing product. I was just seeing machines. I love that and they were just gorgeous. Gary told me the history how they were founded in 1927 by his grandfather. This is where my roots come in as a third-generation Jewish family – a design driven business. I said, ‘hey I’m the grandson of a Jewish founder who’s a control freak. Like you I moved to Cleveland to be part of a family business and*

*struggled to have a voice in the business. My intuition is good and that was Gary's experience. I said let's get lunch. I wanted to talk to him about being a third generation legacy family."*

## **Ohio Knitting Mills Is America's New Entrepreneurial Frontier of Reinvention and Reclamation**

*Steven saw a perfect opportunity and as he said, "What Ohio Knitting Mills has come to represent is a wonderful happenstance is when I met Gary and found out that he had a huge collection of sweaters from the 40s that he didn't know what to do with and maybe I had some ideas. He hired me to do some consulting and marketing for him. To him the problem meant selling things. I came back to him and said my advice to him – again this is an example of creating opportunity. I said, 'I think you're sitting on a gold mine. The raw DNA of a fabulous, unbelievable, potentially monster of an apparel brand – call it Ohio Knitting Mills.' He said, 'huh?' He said, 'I've been doing it for 41 years – if you think it's so great why don't you do it?' We worked it out."*

## **Levis Would Be The Perfect Fit**

*Serendipity is not enough to make something happen. It requires taking the baton and moving on the initiative. When I was with Steven, he fielded a phone call from Levis and notes, "this is a close friend and he's a director there. He called to see if I could send him a few copies of the book because he wanted to show it to the head of the men's division – he thinks the time is right to revisit. My attitude is that they're about pure Americanism. I'm about pure Americanism. They're developing a new direction in their marketing narrative. They have discovered the new frontier and the new frontier in the post Industrial America – is in our cities. The new frontiers are not the Wild West. It's not the Gold Rush – which was the origin of Levis. What can we discover in the left behinds? What is it in our cities and urban places and our former industrial places – in the manufacturing that is beautiful? Yes it's neglected but it's not something to throw away. This is our soul. This is the essence of who we are. We need to embrace it -- put it back together and put our future together. This is the heart of this huge movement toward Americana and heritage labels."*

## **A Great Story: Rebranding Vintage Knits From A Family-owned Heartland Manufacturing Mill**

*Steven knew he found something special and he says, "The way I looked at it and described the opportunity was a vast archive of really cool quirky knit pieces as the basis of articulating the brand. The story of Ohio Knitting Mills is the authentic story of heartland manufacturing in a community of makers in the industrial era and the craftsmanship of that era to make goods that reflect postwar American popular culture. It's cool. It's about color, patterns, and playfulness. It's so rare to have something, to find something like this that has a whole language. It's like discovering the Lost City of Atlantis. Then I just went for it. I raised privately \$100,000 from four individuals. Again, it was 2005 and 2006, a few people said I'll throw \$50,000 your way and see what happens."*

## **The Takeaway: An Organic Appreciative Outlook**

*Steven views leadership as a collaborative, relational process and intuitively understands the importance of asking for input from all stakeholders. He is inclusive and knows that all ideas contribute to the whole and create value. There is no such thing as a stupid idea.*



Every idea is marker and board worthy.

He intuitively and organically integrates elements of an “Appreciative Inquiry” (AI) 4-D process into his creative approach. “Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives a system ‘life’ when it is most effective and capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to heighten positive potential” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999, p. 10). An appreciative leader engages in the following processes: “valuing the communication of others, honoring diverse viewpoints, including all potential stakeholders in the dialogue, recognizing multiple selves, cultivating ‘not knowing,’ and nurturing narratives of ‘we,’ and moving beyond practices of blame” (Anderson, Cooperrider, Gergen, Gergen, McNamee, Watkins & Whitney, 2008, p. 46).

The AI position of examining “what’s working” while embracing positivity and inclusion allows for a different kind of discourse that fosters forward-thinking change. Steven, like many in the creative arena, already implements many of the appreciative practices of “discovery (what people value), dream (‘what might be?’), design (‘co-constructing’), and destiny (organizing for change/sustaining)” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999).

### **Don’t Hang Out With People Who Give Agreement To Your Complaints**

Steven offers good advice, *“gravitate toward colleagues and find people whose value you recognize and hang out with them – hang on to them. That includes a variety of people. I don’t think it’s good to hang out with people who give agreement to your complaints. Hang out with people who believe in their ability to achieve their goals and adopt their thinking.”*

He is not afraid to ask for the deal and says, *“I’ve been forced into it. Every entrepreneur will tell you retrospectively how everybody thinks it was a great idea – but I promise you nobody thought it was a great idea in the beginning. It was a great idea when they demonstrated the success of it. Before that it was just an idea. I say to students – ideas are a dime a dozen to people like us. It only matters what you do with it. If you can’t build the process, the plan and negotiate and make it yours and own it, and own it – and own it again – and own it some more.”*

### **The Takeaway: One Year Later**

Steven is still freelancing while working on attracting investment partners to start producing the collection. Recently, he sold 5% of Ohio Knitting Mills to pursue the next phase of manufacturing which gives him the financing to produce an American made limited edition run of the dress featured on the cover of the Ohio Knitting Mills book (Figure 1).

He has an ongoing partnership with the firm Design Within Reach where he has “trunk shows” at multiple store locations throughout the United States. This is helpful for both businesses and provides a new kind of model for “mutual coordination” (Gergen, Schrader & Gergen, p. 247). Click the following link for Design Within Reach and Ohio Knitting Mills ([http://blog.craftzine.com/archive/2007/08/ohio\\_knitting\\_mills\\_trunk\\_show.html](http://blog.craftzine.com/archive/2007/08/ohio_knitting_mills_trunk_show.html)).

The “pop-up” stores he developed were an inventive way to showcase his product. This started when a real estate developer wanted him to lease space in a trendy urban renewal

section of Cleveland. At that point, Steven had closed the Ohio Knitting Mills store in Brooklyn, New York and did not have the resources to rent. He was offered free space last Christmas (2010) to sell sweaters and sportswear. This allowed him to raise capital and attract potential investors for Ohio Knitting Mills. Click on the website to see Steven's Cleveland Institute of Art video showing his merchandise and pop up location site (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7sFwH3l7DQ>).

Steven Tatar is all about collaboration, community, repurposing, inventing and strengthening manufacturing in America. Current projects include designing a collaborative space for the solo entrepreneur for a company called The Open Office; developing a second book on the history of the Cleveland garment industry; and continuing outreach to attract investors to manufacture the Ohio Knitting Mill vintage sweater and sportswear collection in the United States. Steven Tatar is definitely the new face of the freelancer turned entrepreneur -- a mover, shaker and "macher."

## **Sheryl White - Award-Winning Copywriter**



# Sheryl White

## Appreciative Reflection – Copywriter

Bill Cavanaugh, another project participant, has been talking about his friend Sheryl who has been working on major national accounts as creative director and copywriter for as long as I can remember. It kind of became a joke when I asked Sheryl to be a participant in this project even though we had never met before. Every time Bill would say, “*my friend Sheryl.*” I would respond, “*you mean MY friend Sheryl.*” After we finally met and had our conversation – I can honestly say she’s MY friend too.

Sheryl is one of those rare people who operated primarily as a freelance writer for more than 35+ years in the highly charged New York City advertising arena and that is nothing short of astounding. Sheryl used to commute from her apartment in Manhattan to her home in Woodstock every weekend to decompress. In the last few months, she has given up her New York City apartment and has migrated to the quieter area of Woodstock, New York and continues to work as a copywriter in her rustic cabin-like home in the woods. Although the stress from living in the city has somewhat abated, the demands of making a living in the advertising industry are still there.

## The 35+ Year Freelancer – Embracing The New

Sheryl is candid about her career, “*I started at a major global ad agency in Ohio as a junior. I was there about six months and they decided to close the office. I was in Cleveland and everyone was moving to New York and I wasn’t -- so I flew myself to New York. It’s kind of like the show ‘Mad Men’ -- everybody smoked, drank, and all the people in charge had three-hour lunches and came back ‘shnocked.’ I didn’t last long there because my drunken boss didn’t like me. I was forced on her basically. I got fired and that was a real wakeup call. It was my first job. So I started freelancing for the next ten years. I would go from freelance to staff jobs – because a company would force me to take a staff job because of some laws or whatever. I always preferred freelancing because if you don’t like it you leave. You’re always on to something new -- and always meet new people. You have a bit more autonomy -- not a lot. You work a lot harder when you’re freelancing.*” Sheryl adds, “*You have to be more on call for them. You have to prove yourself a little more because you’re not there. You put in more hours -- you work harder. They don’t call you unless they need you. So it’s going to be a tough assignment.*”

## Changing Loyalty: The Focus is People Not Companies

Sheryl expressed that the downside of freelance is the last minute aspect. She says, “*They’re never prepared when you come in. It takes two days for you to find a computer because it’s all happening so fast. At the big agencies, you have to do all the paperwork.*” Yet, I mentioned that this is a conscious choice and wondered why? She comments, “*I like*

*not being beholden to anybody but myself – because I think my values are stronger than theirs.” And then continues, “Years ago companies treated you with respect – more like family. Today you could have been at the company for 30+years and they’ll walk in your office and say you’re fired – tell you to leave immediately – and they escort you out. In the old days, they’d give you an office for a month. They sure don’t do that now. I decided that I’d never be loyal to a company again. I’ll be loyal to the people within it – wherever they go.”*

## **A Leading Software Campaign**

Her description of the rush campaign for a leading software company demonstrates the fast-pace required in the advertising industry. Sheryl notes, *“I worked freelance at large nationally recognized advertising agency. They normally wanted me there. They were paying me \$700 -- maybe \$500 a day. It was a while ago. They had a special rush project for major international computer company -- they were introducing an application to the world. They said ‘would you stay the weekend?’ I said sure if you pay me the \$1,500 like you’re paying all these other people you’re bringing in. They said no. So I said I’m not working there for the weekend. But I said basically, you’re going to be sitting around scratching your butts all day not getting anything done and I’ll be up in Woodstock and have a campaign done. They said okay. They had small and medium sized business. They said, you take the small business and go to Woodstock and do what you do. We’ll have these \$1,500 a day freelancers do the large business. So I came up here. It was 250 pieces of copy. Everything from direct, to outdoor, to Web, to emails, to print ads -- TV and radio. I figured out how to do it, using some already client-approved copy and lines. Rather than reinvent the wheel -- I would set up each medium – and plop in what the client approved and tweak it for the medium.”*

Sheryl continues, *“When it came back, the client loved it. It won all kinds of awards. Of course my name wasn’t on it. The \$1,500 a day people had nothing on paper. NOTHING. Not a word. They said, ‘you did so well on this – would you take the big business?’ So I said what are you paying all these for if they aren’t doing anything? Why not give me all the money and I’ll do it.”* I ask if they gave her the money. Sheryl rolls her eyes and says, *“no, of course not. I took it home and came back with 250 more pieces of copy done.”* She notes, *“and then it came up for awards and because it was freelance they didn’t put my name on it.”* Sheryl adds, *“I don’t care about the awards. I’d rather they talk to someone that’s worked with me.”*

## **Respects The Mutual Coordination of a Good Strategist**

Sheryl has a good attitude because she doesn’t let her ego get in the way. I found it incredulous that she created the computer campaign, 250 pieces, in six days. The compression of time and budget will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

What made this freelance job successful was that the client already liked and had approved the initial concept. Sheryl intuitively understands the importance of inviting the client into the conversation in order to create a strong strategic vision. It is this mutual coordination of client input along with strategically aligned creative output that is required for a successful outcome.

Sheryl was quick to point out that many copywriters are working without a compass and at an incredibly fast rate. *“It is amazing. It’s unbelievable. It’s ridiculous. Here’s the other*

*thing. Clients today don't care. They can't spell. All these young people that were hooked on phonics don't now how to put two words together. Forget spelling. There are times when I'm running a group and I'll say give me something. They are writers and there are 5000 misspellings and grammar mistakes. And I'll say what makes you think you're a writer? And they'll say, 'well I have good ideas.' There's a lot more to being a writer than having good ideas. You have to know how to edit yourself in advertising where people do not read a lot. I'm amazed and appalled at the writers today."*

*Sheryl is thriving and competing in this climate and stresses, "That's because I know the people that are hiring me and they know what I can do. They hire the young people because they are cheap and no one cares. Most of these people are contacts I've had for years and years. I used to be the fastest writer ever. When there was a problem, they'd hire me because I have an ability to see all the strategy and cut through the bullshit."*

Click on the link to Sheryl White's website where you may recognize a few of the campaigns: (<http://www.yellowdogink.com/>).

### **The Compensation: A Larger Relational Network**

*When asked if she was compensated more as a freelancer? Sheryl replies, "Yes -- but not that much more. I've been a freelancer for seven - eight hundred dollars a day. When you go on staff they cut it back because you're getting insurance, holidays. You make a little less as staff but get more benefits."*

*For Sheryl, 35+ years in the industry, is a testament to not only her talent but also her relational contacts. I ask, "In New York -- that's quite a feat?" Sheryl proudly notes, "Yeah it is. I've been so many places and have lots of contacts. When they leave, they call me and I'll make more contacts there. Every job I walk into as a freelancer today -- I probably know 50 percent of the staff." I asked if knowing that many people works to her advantage and she replies, "yes, I think so (LAUGHS) unless they don't like me."*

### **Experience Counts During Downturn; Relationships Critical**

*A thick skin is a necessity in the advertising world and maybe even more so when you bounce from job-to-job. I asked Sheryl, "do you ever get comfortable?" She quickly replies, "I'm comfortable wherever I go. I know everybody when I go into a place. It's all about relationships."*

*I was curious about working in an industry where many employees are half her age. Sheryl says, "They're kids. We always thought we knew more -- and they think they know more. I just laugh and see myself thirty years ago." Sheryl bridges the generational divide and this extends her work capacity.*

*Sheryl offers a positive twist regarding the recent downturn, "where everybody had to lay off people -- they are now looking to the more experienced to handle more work in less time." Sheryl is a realist and doesn't overrate her skill sets. She recognizes, "it can change tomorrow. Nothing is for any length of time in this business. It always changes."*

*She considers herself "lucky" as do many of the freelancers, but also knows "a lot of good people that haven't been lucky." She attributes her success to her relational connections. "Everybody's only looking out for themselves. Except us freelancers -- we're always looking*

*out for each other. At least in my group of people. We look out for each other."*

*"You really find out when you're unemployed or freelance – who your friends are and who your fake friends are. The fake friends I just cut out of my life," notes Sheryl. It is a great separating device and she adds, "It is because I only have quality people in my life."*

### **Need to Reintroduce Yourself to Clients; Friends Help**

I ask Sheryl to talk about her onsite work and Sheryl says, *"I can do freelance at a company where they ask me to come for two-weeks and two-years later I'll still be there. Which is not good in terms of keeping up your contacts. If you're only working at one company for two years, the other guys forget you. You have to go and introduce yourself."*

Sheryl usually starts the reintroduction process with her friends and notes, *"They really help and I help them. All the time."* When asked if helping other people is more common with the downturn and she replies, *"I have always been generous with my friends – more generous with time and getting jobs for them. The more desperate people get – the more they're helping other people – at least in my world."* She notes that they are more generous when times are tough. She adds, *"There's this guy and I've been his boss and he's been mine. We go back and forth in getting each other jobs."*

### **Always Herself When In New Territory; Keeps Up With Changing Technology**

Bill brought up something that was interesting and that was the need to constantly shift for each client. He always changes himself slightly to reinvent his identity. He called it "Multiple Personality Reorder," where he is continually selling himself and adding something new. I ask how she adapts to so many different environments? Sheryl notes, *"It's not completely relevant to me. I don't feel like I have to do that. Okay, it's weird. If you go to a place that just does digital – you are going to be up against a bunch of kids. Really young know-it-all kids. The problem is that while they may be very good at coding something or whatever. They have no idea of what a concept is. They don't believe a concept is necessary for any digital stuff."*

She is quick to add, *"You need to know the latest things being done so you can offer them up to a client. We just did this campaign for a pharmaceutical company. We wanted to just put a big QR (Quick Response) code in. Sheryl explains, "It's when you take this coupon and swipe it and see what you get, Now they're using QR codes in all different types of mediums. You can put it on print ads. You can put it on a phone. You can receive it on a phone. It's an embedded fancy bar code. It's great and there are a lot of things you can do with it. It's a very hard sell for pharmaceutical. It works better for liquor – or clients who want to be ahead of the latest. You have to know the cool things you can do with the web."*

Sheryl is herself on the job but recognizes the importance of keeping up with changing times. As a more senior freelancer, she is not as concerned with being liked and notes, *"they either like it or they don't – If they don't, I'll go somewhere else and they'll like it. I don't care."*

## **The Takeaway: The Comedy Kvetch; Why Having A Sense of Humor Is Essential**

Sheryl is still working nonstop and humorously comments, *“the clients still act like everything is a fire drill and then they sit on the work for a month.”* She then chuckles about another client, *“she rewrites everything and then says she hates something that she originally changed -- she just can’t remember she rewrote it.”* This is the insanity of the business that I recognize. The speed of the hurry up and wait phenomenon is just accelerated in the advertising world. Humor, mixed with a good-natured ‘kvetch’ (Yiddish word for complaining), is how Sheryl bridges the contradictions, laughs and moves on. Her humorous commentary is a way of mentally shrugging the shoulders and expressing that life can be hard, sometimes unfair, and there’s the add-on humor of voicing the paradox that allows for its release. In Sheryl’s case, she constructs the enigmatic imagery of the fire drill and sitting still. Humor is relational because it works best if others have had a similar experience. Somebody tripping up the stairs isn’t all that amusing if there isn’t a witness.

The hit series *The Office* is more entertaining to individuals who have experienced the messiness of corporate politics. It is the recognition of the reality in the comedy that ignites the laughter. A sense of humor coupled with an innate understanding of the needs of the consumer audience is essential in the field of advertising. Although laughter has been shown in medicine to boost immunity, it may also be the antidote to survive in the corporate world.

Sheryl talks about some crazy rules posted outside a bathroom at one of the advertising agencies. *“They were serious, dead serious – it was a list of 20 things to do when you go to the bathroom.”* I wanted one example besides washing your hands. Sheryl acquiesces, *“One is that if you see someone in a stall and you don’t hear anything coming from the stall – leave the bathroom – maybe they are embarrassed.”* We’re both laughing because the edict was definitely beyond a courtesy flush and I thought they must have been kidding? Sheryl replies, *“NO, they were serious. They got to be the laugh of the industry. Then they backpedaled to make it funny as a joke. Too late!”*

Workplace humor serves multiple functions in organizations, “According to Morreall (1991), there are three specific function for humor within organizations: combating stress, improving mental flexibility, and developing social relations” (Ojha & Holmes, 2010, p. 282).

Humor is also essential in an industry that relies on comic relief in the creation of advertising, and also as a way to assuage the demands of a highly competitive work environment.

. . . a predominantly young, well-resourced, well-educated and fashionable, urban elite’ (McFall, 2004, p. 22). Advertising practitioners seem like a youthful, fun bunch of people – who by all accounts work and live in a conflict-ridden, extremely stressful environment. ‘It’s a job that comes with one form of rejection or another built into every day. You’re either naturally resilient or learn quickly to become so, rolling with the punches’ (Vonk and Kestin, 2005, p. 163). . . Advertising professionals apparently only rarely talk about moral issues, and are particularly hesitant to actively question or critique the values and practices of clients. (Deuze, 2005, p. 136-137)

The strategists and creators of campaigns use keen listening, storytelling skills to humanize



and extol the virtues of their client. They are essentially using an approach that contains a few elements similar to Appreciative Inquiry, a change-management system developed by David Cooperrider at Case Western Reserve University. Appreciative Inquiry is defined as:

Any form of organization change, redesign, or planning that begins with a comprehensive inquiry, analysis, and dialogue of an organization's positive core, that involves multiple stakeholders, and then links this knowledge to the organization's strategic change agenda and priorities. (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 12)

There is a paradoxical disconnect in the world of advertising. In a typical advertising discovery process, the creative team examines what is working for a client in order to capitalize on the important services they offer and then a campaign is launched into the public sphere. That is where the similarities start and end. The advertising or social media agency is generally hired to brand but not change the corporate or organizational dynamics. Advertising agencies primarily focus on "this is what we are about" reflection for the client instead of the future-driven view of "this is where we would like to be." However, I am sure that there are a few progressive social media or advertising agencies offering the integrated services of leadership and change management.

Yet, the same courtesy and understanding provided to articulate and understand the client is not often extended to workplace relations. The pace is frenetic and it really is survival of the wittiest. Here is the rub – there are often more profound conversations exploring a product or service than in-depth relational dialogue with coworkers because of time constraints. The conventional advertising world starts to feel shallow and then a sense of irony becomes key to survival. Humor is a coping mechanism because the creative individuals know on some level that a product has become disproportionately elevated and usurped their importance – you either find humor in the absurdity or leave.

The following is an example of this kind of self-reflexive humor that abounds in advertising:

A guy from KFC arranges to visit the Pope. After receiving the papal blessing he whispers, "Your Eminence, do we have a deal for you. If you change The Lord's Prayer from 'give us this day our daily bread...' to 'give us this day our daily chicken...' we will donate \$500 million dollars to the Church." The Pope responds saying, "That is impossible. The Prayer is the Word of the Lord and it must not be changed." "Well," says the KFC man, "we are prepared to donate \$1 billion to the Church if you change the Lord's Prayer from 'give us this day our daily bread...' to 'give us this day our daily chicken...'" Again the Pope replies, "That is impossible. The Prayer is the Word of the Lord and it must not be changed." Finally, the KFC guy says, "This is our last offer. We will donate \$5 billion to the church if you change the Lord's Prayer from 'give us this day our daily bread...' to 'give us this day our daily chicken...'" and he leaves. Next day the Pope meets with the College of Cardinals to say that he has good news and bad news. "The good news is that the Church has come into \$5 billion." "The bad news is that we are losing The Wonderbread Account. (<http://www.tikifish.com/adjokes.html>)

An ad team is working very late at night on a project due the next morning. Suddenly, a Genie appears before them and offers to grant them all one wish. The Copywriter says: "I've always dreamed of writing the great American novel and having my work studied in schools across the land. I'd like to go to a tropical island

where I can concentrate and write my masterpiece." The Genie says "No problem!" and poof! The Copywriter is gone. The Art Director says: "I want to create a painting so beautiful that it would hang in the Louvre Museum in Paris for all the world to admire. I want to go to the French countryside to work on my painting." The Genie says "Your wish is granted! and poof! The Art Director is gone. The Genie then turns to the Account Executive and says "And what is your wish?" The AE says, "I want those two assholes back here right now."  
(<http://www.tikifish.com/adjokes.html>)

The above narratives are funny because they speak to the perceived ruthlessness that is infamously portrayed in the advertising industry. One way to start changing a culture is to extend the "relational responsibility" (McNamee and Gergen, 1999) and generosity to employees as well as clients.

### **The Takeaway: Play Nice**

Sheryl's freelance advice is to play nice and notes, *"You can't rest on your laurels. You have to constantly keep your contacts up and make new ones. You have to come through with what you say – what they need – and maybe a little something extra. You have to keep fresh. Maybe as simple going outside and looking around. . . Watch out for the piranhas."* She advises, *"they're in every industry and worse in advertising. There are a lot of piranhas – but as many nice and good people. Keeping up your contacts and keeping your word. Coming through every time and helping others."*

She stresses the importance of being good to people on the way up. Sheryl notes, *"You may be on top now – but it 'ain't' going to last. Be a little humble."* Relational responsibility is a pathway to co-creating:

In relational responsibility we avoid the narcissism implicit in the ethical calls for 'care of the self.' We also avoid the self/other split resulting from the imperative to 'care for the other.' In being responsible for relationships we step outside the individualist tradition; care for the relationship becomes primary. (Gergen, 2009, p. 364)

Sheryl's practice of "relational responsibility" with fellow freelancers and clients is what keeps her connected, vital, active and engaged.

## V. The Liminal Freelance Landscape: Geography, Proximity, and Community

***“You have to be able to function as if you are on the frontier again. There’s no backup. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was all about moving from the rural – spreading out and centralizing in the city. That’s now breaking down. People are pulling back out to work in exurbs or small towns like where I am – and staying connected to a big city for the purpose of coming together every so often for face time or to sell a new client.”***

***Bill Cavanaugh, Audio Engineer***

# The Liminal Freelance Landscape: Geography, Proximity, and Community

## Where Are We? The Off-Road Career Trekker

In the world of travel, the media freelancer would be the off-road trekker on a career journey. The route is not a predetermined destination but a serendipitous path of choices and concessions that often offer less in terms of financial predictability and security but more when it comes to flexibility and creativity.

The geography of soliciting and finding clients is intrinsically linked to their networked community – whether it is global or local – and proximity or spatial closeness to clients is a variable depending on the level of collaboration required. Therefore, the topography of freelance is more than just about land – but where we have landed. Geography is not just about place but where we find ourselves in relation to the economy, community, family, friends, and the confluence of influences that allow us to better understand the relational layering of interdependent work. This is the starting point for a conversation that recognizes liminality, community, and proximity as a way to navigate a more expansive socially constructed worldview of freelance.

The first part of this chapter defines liminality, a term describing the psychological space of being in no man's land when between jobs, and then situates the spatial, physical embodiment of this concept as it relates to the media and freelance experience. The physical is not only about geography but also examines the importance of bringing a whole body perspective to work. Many of these freelance participants discuss healthcare practices that are vital to recalibrating the body in a high-energy creative profession, especially to counter the liminal experience of restlessness that comes with waiting for work, while allowing the participants to remain vital, balanced, and active. The second part of this chapter further explores how geography, proximity, and community serve to orient and anchor the freelancer within the liminal landscape.

As we move through chaotic times, this chapter advocates an appreciative stance as one way to positively reframe living with uncertainty; this reorientation allows the freelancer to consider new scenarios while also engaging emergence. As the writer Henry Miller notes, “One’s destination is never a place but rather a new way of looking at things” (Miller, 1957).

## The Liminal Experience: Somewhere Between Falling and Flying

There is a rush of anticipation and heightened awareness that leads up to being awarded a job or project – and a sense a relief when it is complete. Kasumi, an experimental filmmaker and Guggenheim recipient, aptly describes this experience, “*freelance is a cross between flying and falling.*” The freelance experience holds this antithetic tension.

Media freelancers were already wandering through the liminal landscape of uncertainty before the financial meltdown. Liminal, from the Latin word for threshold, is defined in Merriam-Webster dictionary as “relating to, or being an intermediate state, phase, or condition; in-between, transitional” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liminal>). Victor Turner, an anthropologist, referred to this liminal condition as “betwixt and between” when describing a rite of passage in *The Forest of Symbols* (Turner, 1967). Freelance is the personification of a liminal life – you are working while simultaneously seeking employment. You are essentially always in transition which makes your life interesting, exhilarating, and open to something new – and at times terrifying when work cannot be seen in the horizon.

What is a liminal life? The experience of transitioning and changing but not quite sure where you are going or even how you are going to get there. One is suspended in the exquisite in-between – feeling the tensional pull of “possibility” on one end and “not knowing” on the other side. There is a heightened state of awareness when your intuitive antenna is activated and fear is momentarily pushed aside while you embrace the uncertainty of seeking work or completing a new task. A successful freelancer needs to muzzle the fear or they cannot focus to create either the work or an opportunity. As Deepak Chopra mentions in a discussion about what is important in life, “I embrace the wisdom of uncertainty, because if everything is certain, where is the creativity?” (Winfrey, 2012 June).

The concept of the liminal experience is not solely housed in one discipline or field. The original focus was brought to life in the field of anthropology and has since flowed to psychology to urban studies and then migrated into a more interdisciplinary realm.

Psychologists call liminal space, a place where boundaries dissolve a little and we stand there, on the threshold, getting ourselves ready to move across the limits of what we were into what we are to be. Victor Turner introduced the concept: a space of transformation between phases of separation and reincorporation. The sociologist Sharon Zukin transferred the term in urban studies, saying that liminal space is a growing character of contemporary city: she argues that the localism, or neighborhood urbanism, of the modern has been transformed into a postmodern transitional space. Liminal spaces are ambiguous and ambivalent, they slip between global market and local space, between public use and private value, between work and home, between commerce and culture. (accessed May, 2011 [http://parole.aporee.org/work/hierphp3?spec\\_id=19650&words\\_id=900](http://parole.aporee.org/work/hierphp3?spec_id=19650&words_id=900))

Liminal, a lyrical word, belies the paradoxical life that media workers inhabit. A place that straddles work and home, connecting with clients both globally and locally; ironically working in an environment that brands lifestyle but doesn't always want to pay a livable wage, and freelancers are busy creating the culture that they consume.

You rarely hear self-employed workers describing themselves as laid-back. There is an inherent vigilance of always being watchful and hopeful as they surf for their next gig while being acutely aware that the undercurrent of uncertainty can pull them under. The actual surfing, the task of working on a creative project, is a short-lived experience. The metaphor of surfing can romanticize the free agent experience but it presents a visceral spin on the danger and excitement of working in a sea of change. This requires emotional balance and the long-term perspective of remembering that work is cyclical and comes in waves. Marc Jaffe, a comedy writer and entrepreneur, captures the temporality of freelance:

*Because of the nature of the business, you're a freelancer always – even when you have a job – it's a temporary job. Even if you get a job on a TV show, a Seinfeld is rare that it lasts for so many years. So many shows last a year or a couple of episodes and then they're yanked. It's not even whether it's a good show or not. It's rare for people to even stay on a show for two or three years. A producer can change. Everything is a part-time job – it's your focus for a while. Standup you're always getting a new job. I do voice over work and that's short term. You have to look at freelance as a whole career and there will be times when I will have a steady paycheck and times when I won't.*

The media folks involved with this dissertation offer experience and a balanced point of view because they have been free-range workers for over a decade – and have lived through many configurations of typical and atypical work styles.

## **Everywhere and Nowhere**

The website for the examination of media theory at the University of Chicago suggests that media is inherently liminal: “Media may adapt a multitude of forms, even including what can be considered to be ‘formless.’ As it is both ‘everywhere and nowhere,’ conceptualizing media as liminal does not seem too far-fetched” (Allison Wright, <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/liminal.htm>).

The ‘everywhere and nowhere’ concept can be further extrapolated to include the media freelancers’ world of working for many clients and yet not being specifically anchored to one; and this liminal passage is also extended to include the creative morphing from an unknown concept to an embodied media form sent out into the world. The everywhere and nowhere phenomenon can also describe how the media freelancer feels in an oversaturated world of nonstop communication.

This liminal dislocation can also be attributed to the increase of people passing through our lives at a rapid pace due to increased travel and technological advances. This “intensifying interchange” of evanescent relationships is recognized in *The Saturated Self*, “One can scarcely settle into a calming rut, because who one is and the cast of ‘significant others’

are in continuous motion” (Gergen, 1991, p. 67). It is this continuous movement of accelerated Oz-like comings and going that the freelancer recognizes as the part of the job and seeks to balance; yet this plethora of encounters provide moments for connection, creativity, and potential opportunities as illustrated in the conversations with the research participants.

## **Attention to Balance and Perspective Anchors The Liminal Experience**

The notion of liminality can also connect to how it is embodied in the physicality of the freelancers’ lives. For many of the participants, the importance of nurturing the body and taking time for self is very critical when you work with the fast-paced frenzy of many people passing through your life. The quiet time becomes a touchstone for centering and many freelancers in this project mention needing recovery time to regroup and regain their creative mojo. Freelancers recognized long ago that harnessing and balancing their energy is critical to performance. This idea is slowly gaining momentum and in a *Harvard Business Review Blog* entitled “Share This With Your CEO,” Tony Schwartz (founder and CEO of The Energy Project) suggests that in business we are witnessing a personal energy crisis:

Energy, after all, is the capacity to do the work. In the face of relentlessly rising demand, fueled by digital technology and the expectation of instant 24/7 responsiveness, employees around the world are increasingly burning down their energy reserves and depleting their capacity.  
(<http://blogs.hbr.org/schwartz/2012/06/share-this-with-your-ceo.html>)

Schwartz recognizes the growing disconnect between the high energy demand required of the workforce and the return:

The vast majority of organizations — and CEOs — have failed to fully appreciate the connection between how well they take care of their employees; how energized, engaged and committed those employees are as a result; how well they take care of clients and customers; and how well they perform over time.  
(<http://blogs.hbr.org/schwartz/2012/06/share-this-with-your-ceo.html>)

Freelancers, early on, recognized the physical and mental demands of creative work and know how to recalibrate, rest, and appreciate their freedom during leaner times. These generative practices are also discussed in “*The Generative Years: Living What’s Next.*” This running on empty phenomenon is a professional liability for the entire workforce, but deadly for the freelancer who must continually recharge their creative juices while staying open to new opportunities. As Carol Beck, a videographer says, “*The hardest thing about freelance is finding time in the day to be good to yourself – to exercise, to meditate, to make healthy meals. – to do those things you need to maintain balance. That’s the hardest part.*”

Here the idea of liminality can be repositioned in a full body context to include replenishing our emotional, spiritual and physical reservoir as an anchoring device. The idea of creating a generative work environment is an emerging trend that stellar companies recognize and incorporate in their culture which includes: offering healthy food, on-site fitness, flexible hours, encouraging community service, providing creative and leadership opportunities,



and profit-sharing rewards to name a few. Companies such as Google, Zappos, and SAS Institute are elevating the bar for workplace standards and productivity. Click here to view the list of top 50 companies to work for in *Fortune* magazine for 2012 (<http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/best-companies/2012/snapshots/50.html>).

The employees at one of the top 50 companies are undoubtedly grateful for an environment that appreciates their needs. But what if your experience with a company or freelance gig is less than stellar? The first step could be a simple cost-effective act of appreciating what is available. This is not merely putting on rose-colored glasses but an internal device for “finding what we want more of, not less” and according Jaccqueline Bascobert Kelm author of *“Appreciative Living: The Principles of Appreciative Inquiry in Personal Life”*:

It is a sincere and continuous search for the best of what is present in each moment, person, and experience. It is not what we wish were there, but the good we can actually find. Focusing our attention on what we do want will create more of it, while focusing on what we don't want will create more of it as well. If we focus on how we never have enough money, what we create in our lives is 'not enough money.' (Kelm, 2005, p. 41)

What has worked for freelancers to counter the uncertainty is working on things that they have the ability to control such as taking good care of themselves or even the notion of shifting their attitude for better working relations. They maybe cannot control the when and where of jobs but a freelancer can affect a new work environment the moment they enter and are open to collaborative possibilities. The freelancer or consultant is often brought in to see things differently, not as a disgruntled employee, but seen as someone who can suggest change as an outsider without becoming shrill and that requires nuanced social skills of inviting others to share a vision of moving forward together.

## **Precarity Exacerbates Liminality**

The working on one job while searching for another or waiting for the check is a precarious work environment that creates a sense of “not knowing” and there is the tensional pull of possibility that sometimes is coupled with an undercurrent of impending doom. The glory days of risk and reward are definitely more about risk than reward as people are trying to adapt to the new digital economy coupled with the recession. Gina Neff, a media work culture expert, alludes to this new precarity in her article *The Lure of Risk: Surviving and Welcoming Uncertainty in the New Economy*:

The lure of risk – the potential for payout – adds an element of choice, that people are choosing to accept risk rather than merely accepting the consequences of economic structural change. I'd like to propose this new way of thinking about risk and uncertainty. Risk gives the appearance of choice, power, and individual agency. As such, risk provides a powerful justification for the lack of security in jobs of the new economy. If anything, capitalism's social innovations during the dot-com era was that images of risk made a lack of job security a good thing. To those who are surviving the new economy, risk seems to provide a powerful hope of hitting a potential payout. The strong lure of risk combined with individualization



has created a volatile situation in which risk is welcomed and as a means of avoiding the uncertainty facing the collective. This shift of focus away from economic uncertainty and away from collective structures toward individual risk taking, choice, and powers hinders the ability to demand and create good stable jobs and workplaces. (Amman, Carpenter & Neff, 2007, p. 38)

The dot-com era, where the potential for payoff was high, shifted the risk-taking focus to the individual and moved it away from the responsibility of the corporation. Now that we are in a recession, where risk is riskier, the situation is more precarious and there is little room for collective bargaining when it comes to wages. As Neff notes there may have to be a new approach to how we view organizing in the future:

Are there ways that increased security can support entrepreneurial behavior? Could an organization provide for benefits while explicitly encouraging contracting and supporting freelancing work? How can the blurred line between management and employee be addressed? Answers to these questions will be crucial for organizing new collective approaches to uncertainty. (Amman, Carpenter & Neff, 2007, p. 46)

These are questions that will have to be addressed in the new economy because the previous solutions proposed by the two major parties in the U.S. are no longer working according to Robert Reich, Chancellor's Professor of Public Policy at the University of California at Berkeley and former Secretary of Labor in the Clinton Administration, as recently expressed on a NPR Marketplace segment *Who's Got the Right Plan to Boost Growth*:

This isn't your normal recovery because what we've experienced hasn't been your normal up-and-down swing of the business cycle. The fundamental structure of our economy has changed. For 30 years, median real wages have barely increased, and over the last decade they've dropped -- even though the productive capacity of the economy has soared. And that disconnect -- between what the economy can produce at full employment and what people can spend without going into unsustainable debt -- is the core problem. Since the debt bubble burst in 2008, that problem can no longer be avoided or wished away. Keynesian pump-priming assumes that at some point consumers will take over. Once the government has spent enough, consumer spending will then keep the economy going. But the middle class doesn't have enough money to take over where the government leaves off because its share of total income keeps shrinking. For their part, supply-siders assume business leaders and entrepreneurs will create more jobs if they're adequately rewarded with tax cuts. But they won't create more jobs without more customers. And as real wages continue to drop, most people can't and won't buy more. We're caught in a trap of our own making that defies the standard remedies. Neither Keynesian stimulus nor supply-side tax cuts -- nor even the Fed keeping interest rates near zero -- will restore buoyant job growth. The fact is that unless we can get the economy back to the balance it achieved 30 years ago, when the middle class and those aspiring to join it received a much larger share of the economy's gain, we simply can't get back on track. (Reich, 2012, September 12)

The right plan for addressing the economy will not be a Republican or Democratic solution but one that considers people first. The corporations listed consistently as the best places to work are those that focus on creating a work environment that allows for creativity and growth while paying people a living wage. Tony Schwartz in a Harvard Business Review blog, *The Twelve Attributes of a Truly Great Place To Work*, suggests, “The answer is that great employers must shift the focus from trying to get more out of people, to investing more in them by addressing their four core needs – physical, emotional, mental and spiritual” (<http://blogs.hbr.org/schwartz/2011/09/the-twelve-attributes-of-a-tru.html>). For the freelancers involved with this project, it was clearly a choice that allowed them to meet their needs and as freelance jobs and wages become tenuous, they are clearly improvising in the workforce and considering new opportunities.

Before the economic meltdown, the liminality of uncertainty was already a part of the reality for work as a media freelancer. Now you have the precarity of an unstable economic recession added to the mix. There were many freelancers in the time span of developing this dissertation project that went back to school, secured a full-time job, developed their own creative projects, and others that have held off retirement and continue to work at a frenetic, exhausting pace. Bill Cavanaugh, an audio engineer at RazorMix, acknowledges that the risk has always been there but it is increasing in media:

*The fact of the matter is that there's always been a risk and the risk is increasing in this business. If you work for a company – you don't see the risk elements because you have a steady paycheck. You don't see the elephant charging until the boss comes in and says I'm laying you off. You're not ready for it. I have to be the guy that chases down the money without pissing the client off and keeping it friendly. I know what the true financials are. I did a job in December and they didn't pay me until May. So that becomes an issue. You have to chase the work down, do the work, and then you have to chase the money down.*

Jimi izrael, a freelance writer for nationally recognized publications including *Essence* magazine, echoes the frustration of waiting for money:

*I'm trying to get \$750 right now (July 2010) from Essence magazine for a piece that didn't run last year. They put you through so much bureaucracy because they don't want to pay you. You run into that with big companies. They have paperwork you have to fill out – and these hoops you have to jump through – because they don't want to pay you.*

Alan McElroy, a Hollywood screenwriter, describes the limbo of living in the space where the work is finished, you've been paid, and you're not sure if and when the project you created will come to life – while still worrying about when the next job will appear:

*I have nothing in production. Everything is on the five-yard line and nothing is getting across the goal. If twenty-five years ago, I said to myself guess what in 2010 you're going to have a project you sold in a bidding war with 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox with an Oscar-winning screenwriter said to direct. You've got a script at Screen Gems and the president of production said it was his favorite script and he was calling about it. You've got an NBC pilot. A Fox Television studio pilot. Everything*

*is in position and guess what? You're not making any money. I've been paid to write everything. Everything is sitting in limbo and the clock is rolling. Nothing new is being generated. All those things are paid up. So you would automatically think – I should be getting work all the time. I have a lot of people coming to see me for ideas but nothing is locking in. It's a weird limbo I'm in.*

The reality for journalists is that rates were radically reduced as Jimi mentions, “the market in my opinion has devalued about 60 percent since 2003 or 2004.” Jimi is now working a full-time job writing for a nonprofit organization in Washington, DC, continues freelancing, and is seeking a teaching gig. Bill Cavanaugh, an audio engineer who reinvented portability in the industry, chimes in with a similar price reduction of about half even though he is working nonstop. It used to be primarily the journalists who took the heavy hit but now the compression has extended to those in other freelance media venues. Everyone is looking for a deal and the sustainability of working as a media freelancer is tenuous and driving the new precarity while at the same time fostering career improvisation in the nonprofit and entrepreneurial realm as demonstrated by these freelancers. There is clearly a shift emerging driving freelancers to the nonprofit or entrepreneurial sector: Marc Jaffe creating a philanthropic organization *Shaking With Laughter* (<http://www.shakingwithlaughter.org/>); Steven Tatar starting a knitwear company *Ohio Knitting Mills* (<http://www.ohioknittingmills.com/>); Jimi Izrael working at a nonprofit in Washington; or Kate Farrell and Carol Beck both completing novels since our initial conversation.

Deuze, in *MediaWork*, notes the historical underpinnings of the new work culture precarity, “The trend toward flexible work started in the 1970s and accelerated in the late 1990s, coinciding with the rush of an increasingly information-based global economy to the internet” (Deuze, 2007, p. 22). The portrait of the portfolio worker has changed with the recession and the initial thrust of freedom is also eclipsed by an ever-present precarity:

Whereas for most workers in traditional temporary and contingent setting their employment situation is far from ideal, many in the higher skilled knowledge-based areas of the labor market seem to prefer such precarious working conditions, associating this with greater autonomy, the acquisition of a wide variety of skills and experiences, and a reduced dependence on a single employer (Kalleberg 2000). The portfolio of the self-employed information or ‘cultural’ entrepreneur can thus be characterized by living in a state of constant change, while at the same time seemingly enjoying a sense of control over one’s career. Bauman warns against overtly optimistic readings of the relative freedom these prime beneficiaries of inevitably unequitable globalization claim to enjoy: ‘We are called to believe that security is disempowering, disabling, breeding the resented ‘dependency’ and altogether constraining the human agents’ freedom. What is passed over in silence is the acrobatics and rope-walking without a safety net are an art that few people can master and a recipe of disaster for all the rest’ (quoted in Tester 2001, p. 52). (Deuze, 2007, p. 23)

## **The Internet Bridges The Liminal Disconnect**

The study and collective rallying against “precarity” in the work force is a growing social movement worldwide and not exclusive to media workers. Occupy Wall Street is just one example of a movement seeking to call attention to the lack of safety nets in our current

labor climate. The Precarious Workers Brigade in the UK is a clear reminder the distinction between media surfers and media serfs is fragile:

The Precarious Workers Brigade is a London-based group of culture and education workers brought together around issues of precarity. The terms precarity has been used a lot recently and can be defined in terms of the conundrum of personal and collective issues arising from “flexible” insecure work. The proliferation of free, fragmentary and temporary jobs and unstable working conditions can be seen as a structural response to the market’s need for flexible workers, but also a result of a desire, on the part of workers and particularly workers in the cultural sector for more autonomy. As PWB, we come together to map this set of conditions, create a new vocabulary to talk about the situations we find ourselves in, and to develop practical tools to intervene in these situations. (<http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/>)

The online Freelancers Union in New York City, a voice for growing number of unaffiliated workers, has recently created legislation for the Freelancer Payment Protection Act (S4129/A6698) to assure that freelancers receive payment since “almost 80% of independent workers will be stiffed by clients in their careers – and they have no legal protections like traditional employees.” “The Assembly Bill passed in June 2012, and the Senate Bill is currently in the Labor Committee” (<http://www.freelancersunion.org/political-action/paymentprotection.html>). The Freelancers Union’s “Get Paid, Not Played” campaign harnessed the power of the Internet to bring awareness to deadbeat clients (<http://www.freelancersunion.org/resources/unpaidwages.html>).

There is a growing dialogue about precarity, but the new collectivization forged by the Internet is not only creating awareness but also proposing real possibilities for activism, organization, and change. These are the new conversations that will ultimately challenge the workforce to do better.

*Journalism That Matters* is one such organization examining new ways of imagining different journalistic practices and scenarios where sound newsgathering, entrepreneurial ventures, and community-based practices can flourish (<http://journalismthatmatters.org>). New relationships are developing alliances between nonprofits and news organizations. As Peggy Holman, one of the founders of *Journalism That Matters* and author of “*Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval Into Opportunity*” recognizes a new collaborative network emerging:

The capacity to engage diverse perspectives creatively may be the evolutionary leap that our current social and environmental crises are forcing. Handling so much complexity means we can’t do it alone. Although wisdom is expressed through an individual, it is not a solo act. It involves a relationship with each other and our environment. Wisdom lives in the collective. Knowing how to bring together difference and stay connected is a critical skill for our times. (Holman, 2010, p. 176)

Although we are becoming increasingly globalized, what is changing and shifting is a new mobile workforce that is allowing virtual and real worlds to link our community – and the

world. We “yelp” ([www.yelp.com](http://www.yelp.com)) a new restaurant and suddenly we are dining at a neighborhood eatery. There are compelling reasons “why location matters in a networked world,” according to authors of *Net Locality: Why Location Matters in a Networked World*:

We are experiencing a fundamental shift in the way we understand physical space. It is no longer independent from digital (networked) space. The web is all around us. We no longer ‘enter’ the web; we carry it with us. We access it via mobile, mapping, and location-aware technologies. . . Our physical location determines the types of information we retrieve online, and the people and things we find around us. It is true that technologies have become location aware; but it is also true that we have become more aware of our locations. We are more location aware because we are connected in new ways through these technologies to the spaces and people around us. Being aware of location means being aware of all the information and people that exist in that location. And it means making different use of that location. Networked interactions permeate our world. And it is becoming increasingly implausible to act as though they do not. This is net locality. It is a world intimately entwined with the digital networks that stream through it. It is manifesting in everyday social practices like mapping, mobile annotation, and location-based social networks but it has implications for how we engage with each other and the world, even outside of these practices. It affects politics, entertainment, and everyday life. (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, P. 172-173)

The profound transformation in contemporary life is fostered by the new “floating worlds” of mobile devices and offer hope of “communal restoration” according to Kenneth Gergen:

As I proposed more recently (Gergen, 2002), it is in this context that the mobile phone is of unusual importance. It is almost unique as a technology of communal restoration. It offers the possibility for continuous and instantaneous reconnection of participants within face-to-face groups. Within moments, relationships are enlivened, common opinions and values shared, expressions of support and mutual understanding enhanced, and knowledge of the other deepened. . . More broadly, it may be said, that the mobile phone has lent itself to the pervasive state of an *absent presence*, the continuous presence at hand of family, friends, and colleagues who are physically absent. (Gergen, 2002)

Our mobile worlds offer the capacity for distraction, but also for reinvention of relationship:

With the mobile phone the relational net is always at hand. Within moments a floating relationship can be realized. And, seldom is one without the material symbol of one’s relational ties. As a material object, the mobile phone functions as an icon of relationship, of techno-umbilical connection. The Enlightenment Paean to individualism, ‘I think therefore I am’ is replaced with ‘I am linked therefore I am.’ (Gergen, 2002)

The use of smart phones is already enhancing the ability for interdependent work relationships and decreasing the need for as many onsite visits. Yet, many of the freelancers in this project note that proximity to their client is essential but varies according

to the type of project. The human touch is still appreciated and valued (see Hallowell in *A Conversation About Negotiation and Sustainability*).

### **The Why of Living With Liminality: An Appreciative View**

So the question that comes to mind is why do these people decide to live in limbo when it comes to work? Steven Tatar beautifully articulates “the why” of his freelance choice:

*I don't think anyone chooses freelance. The most someone chooses is not to work for 'the Man' and have to be at the same place every morning. People don't say I want to be a freelancer. You say I like this type of work and it happens to be work that is not typically employed but treated as contract service. I'm a freelancer because I got laid-off at the end of the huge burst of an economy. I never really found a job that I was willing to do. I can get a job – but I don't want to get one that isn't aligned with my strengths, my interests, my passions, my intent and vision for my professional life. That vision is everybody's dream – at least creatives. A lot of people don't bother dreaming because they said, 'It's a job you're not supposed to like it.' I've been resistant to just taking a job to pay my bills. Obviously I have to pay my bills. I'm not of independent means.*

The tradeoff for the uncertainty and unpredictability is to find work that is emotionally and creatively satisfying. This new work ethic, echoed by Daniel Pink in his book *Free Agent Nation*, is one of “having freedom, being authentic, putting yourself on the line, and defining success on your own terms” (Pink, 2001. p, 82). The liminality of the freelance lifestyle is supplanted by creativity, scheduling flexibility, and autonomy. When securing payments and finding work becomes disproportionately difficult, freelancers start improvising and begin to consider full-time, part-time, retirement, starting their own business – and other combinations, which are expanding and changing our definition of what it means to have a “regular job” as explored in the chapter “*This is a Real Job.*”

### **Community: The Ripple Effect of Finding Work Where You Are Situated**

Community and relationships, which are at the epicenter of social construction, is also clearly central to the vitality of freelance work. If freelancers were not engaged in a conversation with community and enterprise, there would be limited awareness of where their talents and interests could connect, contribute and make a difference. Even though freelancers are often perceived as “independent” since they have multiple employers, they do not work alone and their actions must be coordinated with others. In the article *When Relationships Generate Realities: Therapeutic Communication Reconsidered*, Gergen states that the power of relationship must work in tandem with words and supplementary action:

The potential for meaning is realized through supplementary action. Lone utterances begin to acquire meaning when another (or others) coordinate themselves to the utterance, that is, when they add some form of supplementary action (whether linguistic or otherwise). The supplement may be as simple as an

affirmation (e.g. 'yes,' 'right') that indeed the initial utterance in some way, e.g. when 'the' uttered by one interlocutor is followed by 'end!' uttered by a second. We thus find that an individual alone can never 'mean;' another is required to supplement the action, and thus give it a function within the relationship. To communicate is thus to be granted by others a privilege of meaning. If others do not treat one's utterance as communication, if they fail to coordinate themselves around the offering, one's utterances are reduced to nonsense. Supplements act both to create and constrain meaning. (Gergen, unpublished)

Steven Tatar echoes Gergen's idea of coordinated action when he expands the vision of creativity from an individual process to a relational process, one that incorporates community.

*You use the word 'freelancer' and in my mind I use the term 'independent creative.' In my mind – more than anything else it's about community. It's about having the benefit – emotional, the professional, and sometimes even financial as a reflection of oneself. It's about the creative process – that noise in your head – not between you and yourself – but amongst people who resonate with me is the single most important element.*

It is participants' relational connections, a seemingly unimportant discussion in a coffee shop or a chance encounter, which indirectly pulls the freelancer to the next position. They often use the term "luck" (see Jaffe Appreciative Reflection) to describe a happenstance moment but freelancers have the improvisational ability to seize on a situation and alchemize an opportunity and make it their own. Marc Jaffe remembers the importance of his agent convincing him to check out Jerry Seinfeld's performance in Cleveland and that prompted a subsequent writing gig:

*I had met Jerry a couple of times and didn't know him more than casual hellos and stuff. He had his show called the Seinfeld Chronicles four episodes originally in an effort to get a whole series on. It was 1990, I saw that show and knew that it was perfect for me. I should write for this. He showed up in Cleveland and I stopped in to see him doing standup for the weekend. Afterwards I talked to him, I had been doing some writing for Paul Reiser who was good friend of his the year before that. When we talked, I said I'd love to submit some stuff for the show and he was very open to it. I sent him five to ten pages of standup stuff which I thought would be appropriate for him. He called me the day after he got it and said this is great. He said come on board. One time I was lucky in the right place at the right time – and asked – and had the stuff to back it up.*

It was through referrals, relationships and making the effort to connect that he started writing for Seinfeld and then continued to develop his own unique projects from game shows to the Elijah Cup (see Jaffe Appreciative Reflection).

Marc Jaffe, dealing with his wife's Parkinson disease prognosis, co-created a play 'Side Effects May Include,' that not only involved his local community in their fundraising efforts but also co-developed a foundation *Shaking with Laughter* that is raising awareness, money, and support for Parkinson research and the funds are coordinated with the Michael J. Fox foundation and the Cleveland Clinic Foundation. Here fundraising efforts reach the Hollywood community where Marc's friends in the industry extend their "star value" and



contribute time, tickets and personal involvement with his Internet auction. The highest bid, for \$17,500, was a 20-minute minute pitch meeting with Larry David (co-creator of *Seinfeld* and creator of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*). The new freelance is about realizing that the creation of opportunity can take place on a stage other than Broadway or Hollywood. The ripple started locally in Cleveland and is now extending to a more global stage.

The freelance projects that these participants are engaged in usually start with a relationally-driven recommendation that comes from people who recognize that they can do the work at a high level – that generally know them or someone that knows their work – and ultimately the collaborator or employer must value working with the freelancer. Freelance is predicated on the notion that people want to work with individuals that can do the job, but also a person that they can work with and that is extremely important. With long hours and collaborative intimacy, a media freelancer with exceptional talent and poor relational skills would not last long. “It is, in other words, not only about being good at something – it is also about carefully cultivating the image of being good” (Deuze, 2008, p. 19). The reflection on the freelancer’s contribution to the project is often casually unpacked in after-hour social gatherings. As project participant Steven Tatar notes, “*Business is about relationships. It’s face time. Let’s have a drink time. Hanging out ‘til you get it time.*”

After mixing *Sesame Street* for a long time, the producer with whom Bill Cavanaugh was working with died and that temporarily ended that contract. Bill comments on the strength of relationships to help get you a job:

*I mixed Sesame Street in the early 90s into the 2000s. The producer I was working with died and a whole new staff came in and I had to reintroduce myself. Ironically, the Vice President of International Production came from the History Channel – who I worked with on several television series. He said to his staff that you’re paying way too much in studios and I have to turn you onto this guy and his system. I went to a Sesame workshop and did a demo and the system blew them away – and they hire me now.*

Bill’s story reflects the value of relationships, which is situated at the core of not only Social Constructionist Theory and Appreciative Inquiry but also the Freelancers Union’s philosophy, which talks about a “New Mutualism” where all parties benefit (<http://www.freelancersunion.org/>). The core philosophy they espouse:

. . . the belief that political and economic life flourishes in social networks, and that social change requires individuals to shift their thinking from ‘I’ to ‘we.’ At the core of this movement is a culture of interdependence, mutual support, and affinity, with building sustainability, rather than maximizing short-term profit, as a goal. (Horowitz, 2011)

Seth Godin, a media innovator, reveals in his new publication *Stop Stealing Dreams: (What is School For?)*, also values the power of personal connections:

The connection revolution is upon us. It sells the moment short to call this the Internet revolution. In fact, the era marks the end of the industrial age and the beginning of something new is ultimately about connection. The industrial revolution wasn’t about inventing manufacturing, it was about amplifying it to the point where it



changed everything. And the connection revolution doesn't invent connection, of course, but it amplified it to become the dominant force in our economy. Connecting people to one another. Connecting seekers to data. Connecting businesses to each other. Connecting tribes of similarly minded individuals into larger, more effective organizations. Connecting machines to each other and creating value as a result. In the connection revolution, value is not created by increasing the productivity of those manufacturing a good or a service. Value is created by connecting buyers to sellers, producers to consumers, and the passionate to each other. (Godin, 2012, p. 36-37)

### ***Relationships Matter: "Freelance Is a Team Sport"***

We are all acutely aware of the power of the Internet, social networking and technological invention to transform and change. We are standing at a chaotic crossroad and this presents an opportunity for reinvention and renewal.

What I have discovered with all the freelancers in this project is that relationships matter. It is essential for innovative individuals to engage others in the creative process in all steps from concept to completion. As Steven Tatar notes:

*Partnerships are so important. The bottom line is that freelance is not an end to itself. It's where you live. It's like having a one-bedroom apartment. It doesn't mean that you sleep alone. It's still a team sport."* Steven discusses why he hired me, "I knew that some of the things I called you in on MarchFIRST were not things you had an intimate knowledge of – but I knew you would figure it out – and when given the opportunity to engage – you're all in and give everything. I need to surround myself with people where they're not just running the meter. . . People who are willing to take on the challenge without knowing what success would look like.

For most freelancers, there is fundamental trust in the ability of the other project participants to not only complete the job – but to make it exceptional. This is relational knowledge of having worked together in the past and knowing their performance skills and level of commitment.

### ***The New Loyalty Gravitates Toward People – Not Companies***

Talent is not enough in this new economy because people will not work with you again if you prove difficult or irresponsible. All contract services thrive when based on the premise of trust – people need to know you, your work style, your work ethic, and most importantly trust you to complete the job when promised. As my copywriter friend Sheryl White explains how the new loyalty gravitates toward people and not companies.

*Everybody's only looking out for themselves. Except us freelancers – we're always looking out for each other – at least in my group of people. Years ago companies treated you with respect – more like family. Today you could have been at the company for 30-years and they'll walk in your office and say you're fired – tell you to leave immediately – and they escort you out. In the old days, they'd give you an office for a month. They sure don't do that now. I decided that I'd never be loyal to a company again. I'll be loyal to the people within it – wherever they go.*

Sheryl's statement of loyalty to people and not companies builds a case that it is the people who make the companies. Companies that focus on relationships among its workers continually strengthen their brand and are consistently in the top 100 companies that garner attention for being a great place to work. Google is frequently seen as an innovator, not only for their online applications, but also for making the work climate productive, hospitable, and enjoyable.

### ***Bridging A Divergent Community Jumpstarts Discovery and The Economy***

Geography, proximity and community are vital in the world of freelance work. Community is an important driver for discovery because we hear about jobs or potentially beneficial situations while on the way to do something else, through everyday conversations, and this requires nuanced social skills. The following section, *Discovered Gold While Searching For Steel*, is a perfect example of the importance of secondary connections called “bridging” which Richard Florida describes as, “looser ties that extend across and connect different groups. . . Bridging activities provide the conditions for creativity, for the Eureka moment when new possibilities suddenly become apparent” (Florida, 2009, p. 120). It is often through secondary bridging activities that lead to surprising opportunities.

### **Discovered Gold While Searching for Steel**

A bridging moment organically happened when Steven Tatar discovered a vintage knitwear company, Ohio Knitting Mills, which was in the process of closing down while he was out scouting for some structural steel for an art project. He was also looking for a new community location for a development meeting in Cleveland and somebody mentioned that Ohio Knitting Mills had a lot of space. Steven was a bit surprised to find the shell of a working knitting mill and arranged a subsequent meeting with the owner who was interested in selling off the remainder of knitwear stock. Steven's discovery was a pleasant surprise and he remarks:

*We were snooping around. I walked in and there were these old knitting machines in operation still knitting. There were thousands and thousands of cones of yarn. They were in the process of packing it up and shutting it down. But they were still running out a few contracts and orders. There was a skeleton crew of about a dozen people at the max. It was clearly on its way down. The vibe was so real. It was old school.”* Steven, an entrepreneurial freelancer, envisioned greater branding possibilities for this vintage knitwear collection (1947-1974) and this prompted the rebirth of Ohio Knitting Mills (<http://www.ohioknittingmills.com>).

He is seeking partnership to take this clothing line to the next level and is currently poised to produce some limited edition items in the United States.

As Steven notes, “*I am all about repurposing in a structural way.*” Steven is also about reigniting the American imagination to the beauty of made in America and notes:

*The new frontiers are not the Wild West. It's not the Gold Rush. What can we discover in the left behinds? What is it in our cities and urban places and our former industrial places – in the manufacturing that is beautiful? Yes it's neglected but it's not something to throw away. This is our soul. This is the essence of who we are.*

*We need to embrace it -- put it back together and put our future together.*

Although cities and environments shape us in profound ways, Steven's commentary is also an example of how we shape our community by discovering beauty and opportunity where we are. While attending my twenty-something neighbor's housewarming in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, I met an urban planning student studying the economic effects of textile mill shutdowns and I suggested reading Steven's book *Ohio Knitting Mills – 26 Patterns Celebrating Four Decades of American Sweater Style* (<http://www.ohioknittingmills.com/collections/the-ohio-knitting-mills-knitting-book>) (Tatar with Gromilus, 2010). We extended the discussion as she walked over to my house to check out the book. Her eyes were filled with a sense of possibility and awe. This is why dialogue makes a difference because it engages the imagination.

### **The Magic of Reinvention; “Elijah Drinks”**

Bridging is that ah-ha moment that also prompts invention. You don't have to be Jewish to appreciate Marc Jaffe's latest invention. The “Elijah Drinks” cup is a collaborative creation and I asked him to provide backstory for a non-Jewish audience. Marc begins:

*There's a tradition at Passover Seder where a cup of wine is set up symbolically waiting for Elijah the prophet at your table. Some time after the meal is over; you invite Elijah in to drink with you. Most people go through a show of opening the door to let Elijah in. And of course Elijah never comes in. We ended up not having Passover at our house one year and this family we had it with – did something like shaking the table and pretending that he was drinking from the wine as it was moving around in the cup. I thought that was kind of lame. Why don't you have something so the wine disappears from the cup and then the light bulb went off in my head. I thought that could be made and I went to Kerry Pollack, the friend who is a magician (Penn & Teller/Copperfield) and could create all this stuff. We didn't want it to disappear gradually – it needed to go down all at once when the door was opened – preferably without having your hands on it.*

Four Passovers later it is on the market for “\$39.95” on Amazon. Marc jokes, “It's a limited market. There are not enough Jews in the world. I'll have to go to China and make it cheaply or find another place where shipping wouldn't be a problem. Israel is another potentially big market. I've sold a limited amount to Israel because shipping is expensive.” Lately, I've seen the “Elijah Drinks” cup advertised on Amazon.com, and various Judaica websites. Click on the following youtube.com link to see Elijah Drinks (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozRlky5b0yw>).

The Elijah Cup, a collaborative venture, is an example of the power of conversations to create joint action. That is the advantage of having a socially networked community. Here relationships from the past can easily intersect with the present and then ultimately link to our future. These encounters allow new possibilities for intellectual exchange, innovation and networking to emerge. Richard Florida in *The Atlantic* writes that highly developed social skills differ from sociability. “They include persuasion, social perceptiveness, the capacity to bring the right people together on a project, the ability to help develop other people, and a keen sense of empathy” (Florida, October 2011).

## Geography: Creative Folks Live Everywhere; Cleveland Is No Joke

The freelancers involved with this project, with a long history working in media, all demonstrate the survival instincts, tenacity, relational and improvisational skills needed to thrive in less than ideal situations – and that can sometimes include location.

Seven of the eleven media freelancers, many of whom are nationally recognized for their creative work, hail from Cleveland, Ohio – yet their sphere of influence is national and at times international in scope. Cleveland, with a gritty postindustrial backdrop, is a community that offers affordability and culture. Cleveland as an underdog location, much like Detroit and other Rust Belt cities, is a tough place where people provide the color in a frequently steel-grey landscape. The motto, “Cleveland you’ve got to be tough,” is no joke. When media comes to mind, Cleveland is not first and foremost on anyone’s list as a location conducive for freelance work -- yet creativity abounds.

The seven project participants living in Cleveland include: jimi izrael, a commentator on NPR *The Barbershop* and recent author of *The Denzel Principle: Why Black Women Can’t Find Good Black Men*, (2010); Kasumi experimental media artist and recent Guggenheim recipient; Steven Tatar entrepreneur Ohio Knitting Mills, Internet designer and former creative head of American Greetings; Ayad Rahim, *New York Times* Blogger with a focus on the Middle East; Laura Paglin, filmmaker and documentarian; Marc Jaffe, former Seinfeld comedy writer, entrepreneur, and philanthropist; and Alan McElroy screenwriter whose latest project, *Man and Wife* (2011), was picked up in a bidding war with *X-Men* producer Ralph Winter. He’s currently working on three television pilots. You can view all their work in the companion Appreciative Reflections.

Richard Florida’s solution for post-recession future growth is the encouragement of mega regions, “the great mega-regions that already power the economy, and the smaller, talent-attracting innovation centers inside them – places like Silicon Valley, Boulder, Austin and the North Carolina Research Triangle” while suggesting that the challenge in Rust Belt cities is “managing population decline without becoming blighted” and suggests which I agree to some extent, “the economy is different now. It no longer revolves around simply making and moving things. Instead, it depends on generating and transporting ideas” (Florida, 2009, March).

In my view, we need to move beyond location and view the imagination as a way to jump-start and fuel the economy. Cities, housing markets, and popular destinations are always in a socially constructed flux, but creative individuals can greatly impact a city or region wherever they are situated. Even the term “Rust Belt” starts with a deficit discourse that does not allow people to imagine a richer, more vibrant scenario. Imagination will be the driver of the new economy wherever people are situated. A recent book *“Rust Belt Chic: The Cleveland Anthology”* captures the appeal of why creative people decide to call Cleveland home:

America is in the grips of a budding “roots movement.” Desires for the splashy are giving way to a longing for the past. Many are turning back toward the Rust Belt and geographies like it to find what’s they’ve been missing. Yes, the Rust Belt is a

severe land, a disinvested land, a land of conflict. But the Rust Belt is also a land that lacks illusions. And that is becoming attractive to folks, be they a returning expat from Florida or a young creative type tired of the bells and whistles of Global City, USA. This attraction is captured by the term “Rust Belt Chic”. . .

Rust Belt Chic is churches and work plants hugging the same block. It is ethnic as hell. It is the Detroit sound of Motown. It is Cleveland punk. It is getting vintage t-shirts and vinyl for a buck that are being sold to Brooklynites for the price of a Manhattan meal. It is babushka and snakeskin boots. It is babushka in snakeskin boots. It is wear: old wood and steel and vacancy. It is contradiction, conflict, and standing resiliency. But most centrally, Rust Belt Chic is about home, or that perpetual inner fire longing to be comfortable in one’s own skin and one’s community. This longing is less about regressing to the past than it is finding a future through history. (Piiparinen & Trubek, 2012)

It is hardscrabble cities like Cleveland, Detroit, and Pittsburgh that are making a comeback not because they are imitating other popular destinations but because they are “offering the promise of a better (cheaper) quality of life – and yes, the ironic pleasures of bowling, pierogies, and polka – Rust Belt cities truly have become ‘chic,’” according to writer Douglas Trattner (<http://www.freshwatercleveland.com/features/rustbeltchic060712.aspx>).

Cleveland is an edgy city where creativity is thriving precisely because it lacks pretense, at times self-deprecating, and is now enjoying entrepreneurial buzz because of reverse-migration trend of “brain gain” as “talented, educated, creative people are no longer fleeing the region – they’re flocking to it, “ according to an article in *Details* magazine in April 2012 (<http://www.details.com/culture-trends/critical-eye/201204/rust-belt-revival-brain-gain-think-tank>). A video segment on MSNBC (March 12, 2012), with writer Jesse Ashlock from *Details* magazine, discussing the Rust Belt revival such as this design company in Cleveland called, “A Piece of Cleveland” that is upcycling the old growth timber, glass, and metal in homes that are about to be demolished and turning into sellable architectural pieces. Phillip Cooley, a model who returned to Detroit, to co-found a BBQ joint “*Slows Barbeque*” and then started created a shared work area, costing 10 cents per square foot with the only stipulation that the tenants teach their craft to the community. A new game changer is the idea that creativity is not just about being in the right place but how we make something happen where we are.

The other project participants in the New York City and surrounding Hudson Valley area include Kate Farrell, former freelance Olympic television and Super Bowl producer, and now is a full-time executive producer for WE-tv; Sheryl White, copywriter for major national accounts; and Bill Cavanaugh, audio engineer for the History Channel, M-TV, VHI, Nova, Discovery, etc. Carol E. Beck, from Atlanta, is an international videographer who works for major national projects including Mercedes Benz, Panasonic, and is involved with the Emory-Tibet Partnership, which is collaboration between Emory University and several Tibetan institutions. Although this group lives in cities more amenable to independent media work, they share similar issues and concerns about securing and getting paid for media projects along with budget, time constraints, and proximity to their clients.

The participants’ voices create a polyphonic chorus of divergent viewpoints when it comes

to understanding how geography impacts their work. While this section highlights that creativity lives everywhere, the following themes represent contradictory, multiple perspectives regarding location.

## **Location Doesn't Matter in the Global Arena: Coordination Counts**

Kate Farrell and Carol Beck are the two project participants who have and continue to work on large-scale overseas video productions. This requires a kind of openness to not only being able to quickly assemble a crew but also “mutually coordinating” their work styles. What does that mean? “Thus, trying to communicate across boundaries is not a matter of simply ‘decoding’ the meaning of the others’ action. Rather, it is a matter of coordinating actions with them” (Gergen, Schrader & Gergen, 2009, p. 247).

Mutual coordination can be experienced in the way relationships are experienced over time, a sense of knowing and anticipating their teammates performance styles, understanding the same professional language without needing to speak, creating a territory of tolerance and respect, and trusting the professionalism of the team members to complete the job even when the demands are extraordinarily tough.

### **Carol E. Beck (Media Producer): Working Worldwide From Home**

Carol has worked on media planning and production for name brand multinational corporations – IBM, General Electric, Coca Cola, The Ford Motor Company, Xerox, Panasonic, Home Depot, Honda, Proctor and Gamble, and others. Her professional expertise involves managing international logistics in Venezuela, Australia, Budapest, Germany, Amsterdam, Beijing, and India. I teasingly ask if I’m missing anything? Carol nonchalantly responds, “*Japan and all over Europe.*”

When you work on large productions for corporate clients, the global dimension requires working with a large international crew. Carol gives a wonderful example of IBM’s global investor’s meeting and notes how mutual coordination overrides geography:

*I'll give you a really good example on how geography doesn't play. I worked on a project for an IBM global investor's meeting. The meeting was taking place in Bangalore, India. I was here in Atlanta at my desk. The executive producer was in New York City. My animators were in London. The technical director was on the ground in Bangalore. I had fabricators working in Singapore.” Carol explains fabricators, “they are doing large graphic panels. I kind of lost out on the conference calls because they generally happened at 3:30 in the morning. I sat at my desk in Atlanta until the week before the meeting and at that point I flew to Bangalore.” And it worked? A lot of the teams I've worked with – let's say the Panasonic team – my DP (Director of Photography) is in Atlanta with me along with my executive producer. The creative director is in Los Angeles. We work with other people out of New York and Chicago. It's common on these large events that the team gets together from all over.*

Carol enjoys working on overseas projects. She says, “One of my favorite things to do is the small overseas job. I have worked with my friend Bill for 15 years. We go with a camera package and pick up a local crew – China, Amsterdam or wherever we happen to be. . . You meet fantastic people and it’s really fun working with crews. Crew people are the same all over the world. There’s a certain mentality and way of being.”

### **Kate Farrell (Media Producer): Mommy Dearest**

As a former Olympic producer, Kate is also respectful and attentive to cultural differences:

*The guy I worked with the most is a French cameraman. He’s probably different than some of his countrymen. But he was a top quality sports camera person and he’d say – ‘Katie why are you not telling me to go over there and shoot that?’ He wanted to work hard, hard, every day and be challenged by his producer. But he wanted to have an hour lunch no matter what. That was the European thing – and if I didn’t feed him at the right hour we weren’t going to have a good day. If there wasn’t coffee and a little croissant in the morning things weren’t going to work out. He and I shot profiles in Romania and Russia together.”*

Kate, recognizing her cameraman’s need for more direction or decent food, is an example of the mutual coordination that occurs on a fully functioning set and in everyday life. She may not have her own children but she certainly has the familial experience of taking care of others on the job while retaining a sense of humor:

*Female producers on the road are totally the moms. One great example of that is when I went to Russia and Cuba – I had to bring cash. In Cuba, I had 11,000 in cash and Russia probably 10,000. That leaves you in the position of buying everything for the crew – paying for the hotel rooms, their food, even their beer. The camera guys get that even though they have a per diem. One day the audio guy came up to me and asked for rubbles. I said, ‘what do you need?’ I have to get a receipt for everything, right? He said, ‘because I want some gum.’ I said, ‘Dude buy your own gum – I’m not your mother.’*

Kate illustrates a co-created socially constructed moment that made them both laugh. This turn by turn conversation between Kate and the audio guy demonstrates the performance that Kate enters with her crew when she positions herself as a ‘mom.’ Kate created the mommy role and then ironically responded in mommy-like fashion when he behaved like a young child asking for gum. These are the “family” stories that continue after production crews arrive home and create a bond.

### **Carol Beck (Media Producer): Freelance Crews Speak The Same Language**

Carol addresses the level of crew camaraderie after you have successfully worked with a person and how that inevitably generates future projects together:

*You’re used to being in the soup and trying to figure out how you’re going to do it. I worked with some guys in Australia – a line producer that I needed on the ground and a DP (Director of Photography). We had a fantastic time working together and the other crew people brought on were awesome. At the end of the job, we’re like*



*'see you, nice to know you – have a good life.' Then a year later I'm calling them up saying, 'Guess what we're coming to Australia.' It's the way things happen sometimes. I've worked twice with the same crews in China. You make these relationships. You know that people do good work, they're fun, and when work is over you can go and have a nice meal together, have a beer, and share war stories. It's very relational. In the independent world of production, it's completely based on relationships – once you trust and know somebody. There's an English guy I know who owns a company in Paris. Every once in awhile I'll get a call from him and he'll say I'm going to 'such and such a place – do you know anybody there?' I have some friends who have a small production company in town who do a lot of international work too. I'll say I'm going to Amsterdam. Do you know anybody there to hook me up? They'll shoot me the name of somebody. With people you know and trust, you share resources. With people you don't trust, you don't share resources because they may try and poach your clients. With people I trust, I help them out and they help me out. They give me jobs – maybe I give them jobs.*

Mutual coordination on any production or project, whether large or small, requires respect for the group performance, a strong relational connection and a high level of trust. Although production participants do not always speak the same language, there is a prescribed freelance code of ethics and behavior that is universal if you want to stay working – and one of the highest on the priority list is trust -- trust that a team member will efficiently and creatively complete the job, an assumption that it will be at a high professional level, and that the other participants will respect your established client relationship.

### **Carol Beck (Media Producer): India Presents A Different Caste of Characters**

Carol addresses working with differences on international freelance crews and discusses the challenge of the caste system with the down-the-line chain of command:

*They just throw bodies at things. They have more bodies. Because in India the caste system is alive and well, you have to go through this maddening experience of telling someone to do something and the next person lower tells the next guy, and the next guy and then finally some person ten people down ends up doing it. Then they usually don't have the knowledge and skill to do it right. That can be frustrating. I was on this Bangalore job and they had brought in this electrician from London because we had this temporary facility and there was a lot of power generation required. There were all these huge trailer size generators to run the air conditioning, the lighting, video stuff, etc. I saw him walking really fast one day and I looked at him and said, 'should I be worried?' He looked and said, 'only if you ever see me running run in the opposite direction.' What was happening is that he would have everything set up correctly – grounded safely and the Indian crew people would do it their way and completely undo his work. It would be completely unsafe. They just didn't know. Sometimes you are in situations where you don't have people who are well informed.*

The geography of freelance also includes living in the territory of tolerance and patience. Carol does this skillfully and draws on her practice of Buddhism to guide her in how she positions herself in the relationships of differences and notes, *"In terms of applying my*



*Buddhist practice to work: it's staying calm, practicing my patience with others; trying to understand their needs; and doing whatever to realize their needs."*

### **Carol Beck (Media Producer): Global Commonalities and Personalities**

Carol in the previous sections addressed that sometimes you are in a situation that is less than ideal and must do what it takes to realize their needs.

Her experience in other parts of the world has shown her that there are people who are very well informed and look familiar to your own situation:

*In Europe, Australia, Japan, and China – crew people are well trained and well informed. It's amazing because you meet people who look like other people you work with back home. I work with a production coordinator named Eden. This woman walks in and has taken the lunch order. She is super-efficient. The executive producer I work with and I look at each other and say, 'it's Japanese Eden.' They looked alike, sounded alike and their whole manner was similar. It's somebody we really like. The similarities were hilarious.*

Mutual coordination for both situations, whether there are people you recognize or those that are especially challenging, require us to step back and recognize our interdependence with each other as articulated by The Dalai Lama:

In human societies there will always be differences of views and interests. But the reality of today is that we are all interdependent and have to co-exist on this small planet. Therefore, the only sensible and intelligent way of resolving differences and clashes of interests whether between individuals or nations, is through dialogue. (Gergen, 2009, p. 167)

## **Proximity and Relationships Drive Freelance: Location Matters**

There were two prominent voices mentioned in geography. One viewpoint previously discussed was the idea that mutual coordination, more than location, is integral in the global production arena. However on a regional and national level, it is proximity to the client along with talent and relationships that make a difference. For many of the project participants, the decision to move away from areas of commerce was prompted by family concerns. The relationship can change if there's a locative move by either party or continue depending on all the participants need for immediacy. *The Migrant Creative* participants candidly reveal how proximity intersects with their freelance work.

### **Steven Tatar (Entrepreneur and Freelancer): Freelance Relies On Regional Strength; Work Outside The Region Is Contingent On Previous Relationship**

For many of the freelancers, location is critical. Steven has started a new vintage knitwear company. His home base is Cleveland but is poised to move if the right situation presents itself. He comments about the importance of location, *"I think it's huge. So huge. Freelance is locative. It's a regional strength. Minnesota is not good at shrimping and New*

York is not good for steel production. Cleveland is not good for brand building and services. Now. It has been better in the past and it was a big advertising center.” Steven Tatar suggests that he would consider moving:

*I do believe that in certain parts of the country – because of the culture there and the industries that they’re used to using freelance and get what I do. I know that in New York – I don’t have to explain what is a creative director – or what I do. Portland, Oregon, San Francisco, L.A., --, they get us. . . I’m looking nationally. I’d like to leave Cleveland. At the same time, I value what Cleveland has to offer and what it has given me.*

Steven is doing a serious trade show in New York and acknowledges that work outside the region is contingent on relationships developed beforehand and mentions:

*Yes, I do work for clients outside of the region. Location matters. I’m of the opinion that every freelancer who is successful outside of their region is able to do that because they had a strong foundation to start with which was relationship based. They didn’t just randomly get discovered by a west coast company to develop a new brand for a shoe line in New York. That’s why community is important – you need community not just for your sanity and to keep your soul intact. You need your community to build your business and keep your pipeline robust. We need to have ten possibilities cooking in the pipeline cooking at any one time. For every project I’m doing, I feel like I need four or five different things on the preload because maybe only one of them will turn into a real thing and I need to be able to move to that.*

### **Marc Jaffe (Comedy Writer): Geographically Challenged; The Tradeoff is Family**

The irony is that Cleveland inspires lots of comedy but it is not an easy location if you are interested in writing television sitcoms. Marc’s view is that geographical location is central to his line of work and shares his experience and states:

*Despite the Internet and emails that were kicking in during the 90’s, I was trying to do things from here. The situation had Paul Reiser with Mad About You and I was hoping to freelance a script. It took awhile and I finally got an assignment. I was thrilled. As it turned out, the show was going through a bit of flux at the time. I got it at the beginning of the season and something happened and the executive producer left and Larry Charles (Seinfeld and Borat) came on at the time. I thought this is great for me. . . .As the process worked out, the episode never got made because the arc of the season got changed midway and what I was writing didn’t make sense for the characters they wanted to focus on which was some other season plot point. I spoke with Larry and he said, ‘when you’re not here, I need somebody because things are so fluid and I need to say hey Marc come in today – you’re in Cleveland and I can’t do that.*

As Marc mentions, geography does make a difference because he lives a lifestyle that “we couldn’t live in L.A. My wife also works and has a steady job. It’s not all upon my income. My income is supplementary.” One thing Marc misses about Los Angeles, “although I wasn’t fond of the lifestyle, is the creative energy of people doing what you’re doing on the same level or a higher level.”

## **Bill Cavanaugh (Audio Engineer): Greetings From Elba**

*"From a technical standpoint, I could do this anywhere. But you still need face time with these people. You need to be able to get to them because if there's an issue – I want to be close enough to come and talk to them and will drop by in the city. Proximity matters, adds Bill:*

*Social contact is important. That's why I still take jobs working in the remaining studios. So I can go two or three times a month into the city – so I can be around humans. That's where the Elba line came up. . . just mixing up here and being by myself – I feel a bit like I'm reading books and waiting to reinvade Europe. I'm not going to reinvade Europe. I'm not going to reinvade Manhattan – I never completely pulled out.*

He used to affectionately refer to his home in Rhinebeck, New York as "Elba," a historical reference to the island where Napoleon was banished and Bill talks about the adjustment:

*When I first moved there, I felt a bit exiled. I had to sell a new model and would tell clients I could be there in two hours. I can get it to you in twenty minutes if you send it via the Internet and I can send it back as a full-time Quicktime movie with picture and everything. You can review it and say – can you lower the music here? That's what they did. In ten minutes, they would say can you make this change and it would be uploaded again. Within a half hour, it would have gone through all channels and they would say it's perfect. Send us the final mix files. Then I would follow up on it later and say how did it work? They'd say it was fantastic – see you in a couple of weeks.*

Bill stresses that proximity still makes a difference because clients have not yet acclimated to the new studio work method:

*I could be doing this in North Dakota with the technology the FTP (File Transfer Protocol). The idea that I could be in North Dakota would be ridiculous. Rhinebeck is a well-known town outside of Manhattan. A lot of artists live here. It's sort of the upscale Woodstock. There are a lot of musicians and studios up here. A lot of the engineers are the guys that left the studios in New York twenty years ago and they're still in the mindset of the old studio system and haven't changed their work method.*

Bill's move has opened up some new regional clients including Boston because he was already working on *Nova* and *Nova Science Now* out of WGBH. He notes, *"now they're comfortable enough with me to say you can do it in Rhinebeck and then come to Boston or New York to review it. I have proximity to both cities."*

## **Bill Cavanaugh (Audio Engineer): The New Frontier**

Because of portable and powerful technology, Bill has a vagabond-style setup that can move just about anywhere. *"You have to be able to function as if you are on the frontier again. There's no backup. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was all about moving from the rural – spreading out and centralizing in the city. That's now breaking down. People are pulling back out to work in exurbs or small towns like where I am – and staying connected to a big city for the purpose of coming together every so often for face time or to sell a new client."* Although he left New York to lower his cost of living, Bill and I spoke recently and he is

reconsidering the possibility of maybe moving back to the city since he feels socially isolated.

### **Kasumi (Experimental Media Artist): Personal Contacts More Important Than Geography**

Kasumi, a recent Guggenheim recipient, acknowledges that she should be in New York because, *“no matter how much you can do in your own studio, commissions and big jobs you need the face time.”* She suggests that although geography does make a difference, it is your personal contacts that are more important when it comes to collaborative projects. Kasumi stresses, *“Hired to do a job is one thing. But hired to do a job as a collaborator is another thing. It’s really important to understand the contributions of each person, as is the case in film. If you think your part is more important than someone else’s, then you will fail.”*

### **Kate Farrell (Producer): Geography Influences The Type of Work; Friends A Major Factor**

Kate, formerly a producer on the Olympics and the Super Bowl, is no stranger to large-scale production. She is currently an executive producer at WE-tv where she works on reality television programming. When I interviewed Kate a year ago, she was living in Millbrook, New York and working on freelance. Prior to our interview, she had quit working at WE-tv previously because of the everyday commuting strain:

*“It was at least a two-hour each-way commute on the train. I did that but that was a job that I eventually left. I was looking for work in New York again and no one would really hire me as a ‘work from home’ person. Not in freelance. You have to go on shoots, go on location, be in the edit room. You have long days and you can’t commute two-hours each way and pull a 12-hour day. It’s too exhausting.”*

Kate continues, *“Which coast you live on is another factor. If I wanted to work regularly in reality, I should be living in L.A. That’s where it’s happening. In New York, there’s only about four companies that do reality series in the New York area. . . maybe more I don’t know about. So you’ve already limited your scope. One of things that I’ll do in New York is to keep in touch with my sports friends. Another factor is friendships. A lot of my freelance contacts are people I worked with at all the big sporting events – the Olympics, World Championships, etc.”*

### **Kate Farrell (Producer): Find Jobs Via Word-of-mouth; Occasionally Checks Realitystaff.com**

In 2011, this was the first time Kate went actively seeking work since 1986 and notes:

*I had always been called for work. Always. When I pulled myself out of the business four years ago, folks just thought I had gone another route because I wasn’t around anymore. I discovered that the staff at not-for-profits did not have the same energy and perfectionist level that I had grown accustomed to. So, I got a little itchy for the high-pressure exciting projects and realized I had to look for work. It’s about relationships. I have friends who own production companies and I have friends who work at the cable networks and I just keep in touch with them. I say, ‘what do you have?’ Sometimes I was a little prideful and didn’t want to say I needed more work*

*because I never had to ask for gigs before. Now I'm like just say it, get work and move on. There are places like Realitystaff.com (<http://www.realitystaff.com/>) that post reality TV jobs that I check every way when I am looking for work. They're looking for people who want to work on a reality series like "Real Housewives of New Jersey" – any reality show that doesn't have somebody. When I was looking for editors for my show, I put an ad there. When I was looking for a PA, I told out editors I was looking for a PA but we also put an ad in realitystaff.com. We hired a PA through word-of-mouth, not through the ad but we did both because we need to make it happen fast. I find that my work comes from people I've worked with before who understand what I do and who have respect for me and I have respect for them.*

### **Kate Farrell (Executive Producer WE-tv): Immediacy Trumps Proximity; Companies Still Want You On Location**

Now, she has moved back to the city and is working at WE-TV again on a full time basis as an executive producer. Kate talks about that decision:

*I moved to the Hudson Valley as a personal choice. At the time, I could work from home but once I wanted to get back into TV, I found that I needed to be in NYC again." For an onsite job, the question of can you get there immediately became more important than proximity for Kate's employers and she notes, "For awhile at least from my perspective, certain companies were allowing people to work from home but I think I've heard a little bit of a shift. . .that they want people to be in the jobs – and I'm not talking production jobs. I'm talking corporate or working for a cable company or network. They're not as happy with people working from home.*

### **Sheryl White (Copywriter): Transitioning To A More Virtual Work Style**

For a long time, Sheryl had an apartment in New York City and a home in Woodstock, New York where she would retreat. She was hesitant about moving because virtual work was not as commonplace as people anticipated. Sheryl provided the example of a campaign for global computer campaign and how they wanted her to work at the corporate office in NYC:

*I like to be left on my own. I can get more a lot more done --- especially if it's in the writing phase. I worked at major global agency – freelance. They normally wanted me there. They were paying me \$700 – maybe \$500 a day. It was a while ago. They have a special rush project for a global computer giant and introducing a new software package to the world. They said would you stay the weekend. I said sure if you pay me \$1,500 like you're paying all these other people that you're bringing in. They said, 'no.' So I said, ' I'm not working there for the weekend. But I said basically, you're going to be sitting around scratching your butts all day not get anything done and I'll be up in Woodstock and have a campaign done.' They said 'okay – you take small business and go to Woodstock and do what you do. We'll have these \$1,500 a day freelancers do the large business.' So I came up here. It was 250 pieces of copy. Everything from direct, to outdoor, to Web, to emails, to print ads and – TV and radio. I figured out how to do it, using some already client-approved lines and copy. When it came back, the client loved it. It won all kinds of awards. Of course my name wasn't on it." Sheryl demonstrates the adaptability of the freelancer and she adds, "Those guys never did anything. Never put a word to*

*paper. I couldn't believe it. So there are pros and cons. You do a good job – and move on.*

Recently, she made the transition to living in Woodstock, New York full time and working on freelance projects, which include financial websites and corporate clients. Sheryl presents the new face of semi-retirement as she draws social security while working copywriting projects on the side to stay afloat. This is the path that many retirees will have to take given the recent financial meltdown. After 35+ years in the city, she doesn't miss the every day hustle. It is her long-time connections in the advertising arena that are providing new creative opportunities. Sheryl no longer has to prove herself and is cashing in her creative chips.

### **Alan McElroy (screenwriter): Proximity is Critical for Career; So Why Am I in Cleveland?**

The decision to move away from centers of creative activity often has to do with raising a family. Alan explains:

*When we had kids, we decided to raise them back here. Here we'd have a couple of acres of land, dogs and all the things you can't have in L.A. You can't live in L.A. unless you can afford to buy a house for 15-million dollars and then it would be a fixer-upper or the size of a postage-stamp. So that's why." Alan stresses that if he had to do it over he would have never moved from Los Angeles, "I've seen the affect on my career. Proximity is critical. Getting the job requires being on site and the damage in the 90s I spent a lot of time in L.A. and not at home with my family. There was a tradeoff. I wasn't spending time with my kids. I should of but I was getting the work. I wasn't there and moving in and out of relationship with my kids. There's no stability. I was there and suddenly gone.*

The irony is that in spite of his geographical challenges, Alan has been extremely successful in the screenwriting arena.

### **Ayad Rahim (journalist): Location Does and Does Not Count**

The wages have substantially decreased for journalists. Ayad supplements his income by selling books, is currently working on developing some rental property, and recently returned to graduate school (2012). He notes that location is not critical for him as a writer. However, the geography of straddling two cultures (Iraqi and American) has influenced his identity and work.

Ayad prefers staying in Cleveland because of extended family including a sister, parents, nieces and nephews. There is an emotional, familial connection but not a job-related one.

### **jimi izrael (writer): Geography Not As Critical**

Because of his children, jimi feels compelled to stay in Cleveland. Currently, he is seeking a full-time teaching job to make up for the radically reduced freelance wages. I asked if geography made a difference with his freelance? *"No, not for me it hasn't. With Internet, you can send copy all over the world."* He still works on the weekly NPR show "The Barbershop" with Michel Martin and notes, *"It's produced in New York and I record it here. I do live from WCPN. My geography hasn't had a whole lot to do with my career. There*

*are places with more opportunities but I have to be in Cleveland because of my children.”* Recently married, he would consider moving to Washington DC if the right situation presents itself.

### **Laura Paglin (filmmaker): A Challenge Finding Actors in Cleveland; Cleveland is a Great Backdrop for Documentary**

Laura started working on fictional film and saw that the recruitment of acting talent was a significant drawback when it came to living in Cleveland. Laura says:

*I kept learning from my mistakes. That’s where I didn’t realize that being in Cleveland was such a liability. It made it easier to live because you can teach part-time and live in a pleasant neighborhood – especially with the housing prices. The problem was with actors. I went to New York for auditions. We found a really good character actor Seymour Cassell – but the idea of being in Cleveland for a month was difficult. I was so naïve. I think it was a confidence thing. I should have gone on to the next level and pursued it. I met him in Detroit. He said I think I’m going to a wedding – and we had a guy from New York who was quite a good actor – but then he freaked out about being here. If you live in New York or L.A., you make these connections.*

It was the gritty backdrop of the Presidential election (2004) in Cleveland that allowed Laura to shine in multiple film festivals including Sundance and then subsequently getting picked up by HBO. Click on the following link to view clip for “No Umbrella – Election Day in the City” (<http://www.noumbrella.org/clips.htm>). From working on a new project talking to the women who survived the serial killer Anthony Sewell to her recent full-length feature-length documentary on an E-Prep, an entrepreneurial charter school with a compelling success record – “Facing Forward” – Cleveland is always a featured in her recent work. View the clip for “Facing Forward” (<http://www.facingforwardfilm.com>). The one advantage of living in a city with intense challenges is that there are plenty of topics to discover and document. Married without children, Laura is able to be somewhat versatile in terms of her lifestyle and project choices:

*People hire me because they’ve seen my documentary work. They want something with a documentary style. Maybe I’m lucky in that they come to me. I’ve had no time in the last few months. If someone calls and they want something – I finish that. Then there’s something else.”* It appears that work comes to Laura and she comments, “Now it does. I’m trying not to think too far into the future or I’ll drive myself crazy. Again, I don’t need as much because I’m not supporting four kids. My lifestyle doesn’t demand much. This is the cheapest house on the street. We don’t live beyond our means. It’s a nice middle-class house. It’s a way of adapting to what you do. We don’t have a ‘McMansion’ – and we live in Cleveland.

Laura discusses that she is thinking about living in a more vital, healthy city. I ask what she means by healthier and she replies:

*Where the whole city isn’t taken down by all these problems. We have a huge underclass of people since the decline of the manufacturing industry. It’s creeping into the suburbs too. People move to the suburbs to get away. It’s an insane way of living. Or you just see the ruins of the suburbs because it’s just desolate. Or if you see ‘Nighowls’ – you see the end of it takes place at a mall. We were able to*

*use it because it was closed down. That's what bothers me. There's no aesthetic anything here. People put up crap – they're so happy to have something go in. There's such low expectation for everything. This attitude extends to government. The people that run for office here would be a laughing stock let's say in Portland, Oregon. Every city has its share – but there really is a brain drain.*

Parks, green space, and safety are all critical issues for cities today. If it a city does not provide a safe recreational refuge, then it requires you to work harder or be more creative in an effort to find your personal sanctuary. This is a consideration for where you decide to live.

### **Carol Beck (Media Producer): It's Who Knows You**

Carol works on international and also national projects. She has a steady stream of clients and this is through professional and personal referrals. I ask Carol for suggestions to relay to students interested in working in the industry:

*In Atlanta, 80 percent of the people I hire I've known for five years. When I do have to bring on unknowns, like a low-level production assistant, I get them from friends. 'All my PA's (production assistants) are booked up, who do you know?' I never hire anybody who just sends me a resume. That is the most worthless thing especially when it's addressed to Mrs. Beck and my production company. I write back. First of all, I'm not Mrs. Beck and second I don't have a production company – and third you should get your facts straight before you contact people. That is the most ineffectual way to get a job imaginable. They need to work for free. It doesn't even have to be an internship. They can go to a production company and say, 'On your next production I will work for free.' You cannot get work experience until you have work experience. Nobody is going to pay you to test you out.*

Within the socially constructed territory of freelance work – there are no steadfast rules about what works and who works. All of the freelancers involved in this project mentioned the importance of relational connections and the ability to perform at the high level as contributing to their career.

## **The Takeaway: Whether Freelance Is Global or Local – It Is Relationally Driven**

*"If we are always arriving and departing, it is also true that we are eternally anchored. One's destination is never a place but rather a new way of looking at things." Henry Miller, 1957*

The media freelancer doesn't have time to ponder the state of the economy. They are too busy finding work, finishing work, and then doing it again at a pace and price that is significantly compressed and faster. Freelancers are certainly aware that the content "king" has been dethroned. The Internet along with rapid technological invention has had a profound impact on all the creative industries. "Attention has shifted from the 'what' of content to the 'how' of delivery, branding, and customer relations – in other words toward



management” (Bilton as cited in Deuze, p. 31). Journalists were the first to feel the impact – especially as newspapers imploded. As we rapidly shift from the industrial to the information age, structures and solutions that once worked are creaky and at a breaking point.

Holman articulates what it takes to be receptive to the unknown when dealing with uncertainty in her book *“Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval Into Opportunity.”*

Perhaps knowing that turmoil is a gateway to creativity and innovation provides a reason to open to the unfamiliar. Just as seeds root in rich, dark soil, so does emergent change require the darkness of the unknown. After all, if we know the outcome and how to create it, then by definition nothing unexpected can emerge. Even knowing its value, embracing mystery, being receptive to not knowing, takes courage. Buddhist nun Pema Chodron speaks eloquently of this notion: ‘By not knowing, not hoping to know, and not acting like we know what’s happening, we begin to access our inner strength. (Holman, 2010, pp. 58-59)

All the freelancers involved with this project know that talent alone does not drive creativity or invention. It is a supportive community that has the capacity to bolster our courage, renew our confidence, and allow us to move forward together. As noted in *“Net Locality: Why Location Matters in a Networked World:*

The fact that the web is marching steadily along the path to localization is an indication that local communities, cultures, and contexts have always been relevant, and always will be. It would be naïve to deny the influence of global networks on local communities. However, what we can observe now, in perhaps comparable intensity, is the influence of local knowledge and local information in shaping global networks. It is in this tension between the local and the global that net locality unfolds. Net locality changes the meaning and value of the web, not because the technology has determined that to be the case, but because people have adopted networked technologies for local purposes. After roughly 20 years of existence, it is clear now that the web needs to be understood in its local context. The time has passed for comparing virtuality and physicality. We do not leave our bodies, even momentarily, for digital interactions. And increasingly, we do not leave the context of our locality in order to interact with and within digital networks. We exist in communities, neighborhoods, networks, and spaces. The global networks that enable these interactions shape the conditions, but they do not produce meaning. Meaning is produced locally. (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011, p. 179-180).

The extension of the previous idea that “meaning is produced locally” requires the tagline “when engaged in relationship,” because it is at that junction where emergent possibilities for creative adventures and performances exist.

### **From “Me” to “We”: Freelancers Live There**

This place of chaos and confusion is really a birthing ground for change and growth. Where are we? We are at a crossroads where crisis is presenting an opportunity to move

from an individualistic “me” orientation to a more inclusive and interdependent “we” sensibility. Linked in is not just a professional networking site but a metaphor for the cultural connectivity that is now happening. The era of the rugged individualist is now being slowly being supplanted with an evolving view of interdependence and mutual cooperation. As Kenneth Gergen notes:

In the 1980’s evolutionary biologists began to question the Darwinian assumptions about the relationships among species. With careful attention to detail, an alternative view emerged. The relationship was not one of competition, but co-evolution. That is, the survival of various species could be linked to the survival of other species, with whom they existed in a mutually symbiotic relationship. (Gergen, 2009, pp. 381-382)

Media freelancers were the early adopters of a work style that recognizes the importance of relational connections and collaboration as vital to their survival.

### **Free-range Workers Seek Opportunity Wherever They Land**

Cities are a cultural supercollider where different viewpoints, ideologies and ethnicities inevitably spark creativity and imagination. However, there are other cities that provide a respite from overstimulation and allow for the kind of internal reflection that later emerges in invention or imaginative recalibrations that allow for change. We are all given choices about where we want to live – some ideal and some not. A city, whether vibrant or dull, is only one factor that contributes to the socially constructed success of the free-range worker.

The space that is really innate to the freelancer is one of finding an unusual juxtaposition of where their talents can be useful and getting up to speed quickly in order to produce, create or consult. Many media freelancers may have little familiarity with a topic but they have a willingness to explore, research and quickly learn. This is where they get excited and their creative ideas start percolating. Alan McElroy writing projects range from *Spawn*, *Halloween 4* to a videogame *Hellgate London* – or developing a television series about the CIA and their use of special effects. These participants have the courage to jump in quickly because they have the successful experience of learning new skills, receiving recognition for their work, and this reinforcement allows them to enter new domains with greater confidence.

Steven Tatar, displaying an entrepreneurial eclecticism, has worked on large-scale art installations, designed furniture, built a house, and was also the creative director of American Greetings and MarchFIRST. He has also spearheaded branding/marketing/planning for the International Children’s Games to the neighborhood-based retain LeBron James campaign. Now he’s moved into the entrepreneurial real with Ohio Knitting Mills while working on freelance. Steven produced the Ohio Knitting Mills Knitting Book (<http://www.ohioknittingmills.com>), which celebrates four decades of American sweater style (Tatar with Grollmus, 2010), and used this as a promotional vehicle to entice investors, but also help them appreciate the beauty of this vintage American made knitwear collection. In order to share a vision and bring people on board, it is about “being inspired by those things worth valuing. Appreciation draws our eye toward life, stirs our

feelings, sets in motion our curiosity, and inspires the envisioning mind” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, pp. 26-27).

Kate is another example where she started producing reality television series even though her previous experience was sports including the *Olympics* and *The Super Bowl*. Jimi is comfortable writing books, Blogs, articles, screenplays, handling television interviews, and on the radio for the NPR program *Barbershop* discussing about a wide array of cultural topics from sports to politics.

It is not only a trust in your own ability – but your collaborators must also believe that you are capable of transferring your skills to another venue. Freelancers are always leaving the comfort of the familiar and heading to the new. What we can learn from them is the how they live in the realm of uncertainty.

### **Explore The Other: Changing The Narrative From “Me” to “We”**

*“Successful bonding calls for a transformation in narrative. The ‘I’ as the center of the story must gradually be replaced by the ‘we.’ The ‘we’ now becomes the major protagonist in the narrative of life, the central character to whom everything is related.”* (Kenneth J. Gergen, 2009, p. 177)

Freelancers are natural explorers and researcher and enter many domains through their work and leave again. In entering the new domain that is unfamiliar, the media freelancers explore the “other.” Laura Paglin, a filmmaker, has been interviewing women who have survived an infamous serial killer in Cleveland and is continuously documenting an entrepreneurial charter school in Cleveland. Bill Cavanaugh, as a sound engineer, has done everything from sounds engineering for Grammy award-winning projects, television, M-TV, VH1, The History Channel, Nova, and Discovery Channel on a wide variety of projects. Sheryl White has written hundreds of commercials from telecommunications to pharmaceuticals for national clients. The media freelancer is adept at entering unfamiliar and familiar territory and then bringing it to life. Kasumi has created commercials, written books and also award-winning experimental films in addition to live performances with Grandmaster Flash and DJ Spooky. Ayad has traveled politically from the far left to the right – from Cleveland to Baghdad. He has written Blogs for the *New York Times* and has had his own radio show focusing on the Middle East. All of these participants enter traverse many “othered” worlds and this adds rich brush strokes to their canvas.

Entering the “other’s” world is a shift away from the “me” as it requires one to suspend judgment and entertain other ways of being and doing – and create a relational viewpoint that melds both parties together. This transcends a between “you and me” scenario. As a “we” – there is a value-added shared inquiry (Anderson, 2007, pg. 26) where more many ideas are explored and “we” can create something newer and exponentially richer with possibilities together.

This practice of exploring multiple viewpoints is now gaining momentum in change-management where people are encouraged to listen and be open to conversations espousing many views. Recently, my friend Bill suggested that I look for work at a conservative think tank or foundation and I immediately got it. We need that infusion of

divergent ideas to make something new. There are many organizations that are engaging open dialogue and bridging fragmented communities. Kenneth Gergen highlights just a few prominent initiatives:

*Reuniting America* (<http://reunitingamerica.org/>), an organization working across the country to increase opportunities for collective deliberation. . .The *Minnesota Active Citizenship Initiative* (<http://activecitizen.org/>) organizes citizen-leaders who can take collaborative practices into their community and work environments. The emphasis here is on practices that enable various institutions – business, religious, non-profits, and the like to collaborate in making a contribution to the greater civic good. The *Imagine Chicago* (<http://imaginechicago.org>) project brings together the peoples of poor inner-city communities to explore positive potentials, and to work with institutions throughout the greater city to create a positive future. The Chicago model is now transported throughout the world. *The World Café* (<http://www.theworldcafecommunity.org/>) is a global network of people voluntarily engaged in establishing inclusive conversations about people’s concerns – both local and global. Special practices building fruitful conversations are offered world-wide. *The International Institute for Sustained Dialogue* (<http://www.sustaineddialogue.org/>) organized to bring alienated groups together from around the world; their work includes a concerted program to bring Arab, American, and European groups together. (Gergen, 2009, pp. 367-368)

There are many media organizations concerned about the future of news and democracy. *Journalism That Matters* (<http://journalismthatmatters.org/>) is exploring new collaborative outreach projects and public forums for underserved audiences. *ProPublica* (<http://www.propublica.org/>), a non-profit newsroom, provides public interest stories. *Hacks/Hackers* (<http://hackshackers.com/about/>), serving an intergenerational, international group, brings together “hacks” (journalists) and “hackers” (technologists) to reboot the future of journalism and news.

The Henry Miller comment is pertinent, “If we are always arriving and departing, it is also true that we are eternally anchored. One’s destination is never a place but rather a new way of looking at things” (Miiller, 1957). These organizations present only a few of the many forums for civic and cultural engagement that are addressing change on a wider community level. When we look through the eyes of others, there is a lot more to see.

## **Landing In The Right Place**

The freelancers involved in this story are extremely adaptive and have the ability to improvise with situations as they are presented. Location, although critical, is not their first consideration. Where they show allegiance is to their relationships. I was at a party the other night and someone asked, ‘what would be your ideal city?’ I paused and thought about it and replied, “Wherever I land.” Deep down I knew that I would find a way to connect and locate my space within a community. With “over-the-horizon” radar, all these freelancers intuitively sense when and what they need to shift direction.

There are plenty of “ideal” cities filled with creative enterprise, better opportunities and entertainment. Freelancers are relationally oriented. The folks involved with this project

prefer the “real” of a town or city where neighbors, family and friends intersect. You can either live in a “creative” city or creatively impact your community. Although plenty of folks are now struggling with the economy and that includes freelancers – what I have learned from the participants involved with this project is that they stabilize when they reach out to their network of friends for work. If you want to become more engaged with your neighbors or community, connect with a freelancer because they know everyone.

Although expanding your relational network is important for freelance, it is more critical to know when the cultural voices embodied by your family, friends, and coworkers are holding you back because of their own fears. This idea is explored in the next chapter “*This is a Real Job.*”

## VI. This is a “Real Job”

***“The next frontiers are not the Wild West. It’s not the Gold Rush – which was the origin of Levis. What can we discover in the left behinds? What is it in our cities and urban places and our former industrial places in the mines – in the manufacturing – that is beautiful? Yes, it’s neglected but it’s not something to throw away. This is our soul. This is the essence of who we are. We need to embrace it – put it back together and put our future together.”***

***Steven Tatar, Entrepreneur***

# This is a “Real Job”

This chapter examines how the socially constructed expression “real job” is undergoing a radical transformation as freelancers in today’s workforce now number one out of every three workers according to the Freelancers Union ([www.freelancersunion.org](http://www.freelancersunion.org)). “*This is a Real Job*” explores how a “real job” is a construct that we have socially made up to imply a 9 – 5 job with a sense of permanency or security based on performance. The definition of what constitutes a “real job” is rapidly expanding as an emerging unaffiliated work population becomes more commonplace. Currently, work is no longer about clear-cut lines of demarcation between full or part-time employment. The new normal is about individuals balancing and blending a variety of work styles (e.g. freelance, full-time, part-time) and often at the same time.

The dissertation participants and many other freelancers, juggling multiple gigs, are not giving themselves the credit they deserve for creative work because somewhere in the back of their mind they are hearing the disconcerting voices of family and friends suggesting that this is not a “real job” – and on a bad day they may even agree. Fortunately, they recognize the “real” as they negotiate contracts, create projects, critically evaluate and design media, determine their worth, forge new relationships, weigh their options and decide where to focus their energy now and in the future – that is a “real job.”

“*This is a ‘Real Job’*” explores the risks, challenges, and rewards of freelance work. The participants were asked a simple question, “What are the challenges and rewards of doing freelance work?” The emergent themes were reflective of challenges in the media industry and voiced many common concerns: performance pressure and adaptation, checks flying somewhere, changing production values, compressed wages, the precarious waiting game, erosion of rates, working without a contract, shorter deadlines, increased competition, and tested relationships. Even with escalated risks posed by the current recession, the project participants demonstrate improvisational dexterity in spite of adversity and this discomfort fuels their creativity and propels them into new ventures. Clearly, what we discover from these freelancers is that compensation is more than monetary.

These changing narratives for changing times suggest that a new workstyle is gaining momentum. Before workers can be comfortable with freelance as a viable work model, they may need to quiet the social ghosts haunting them.

## The Big Boo: Quieting The “Social Ghosts”

A common theme for many of the eleven free-range workers is that they remember or still hear the anxious voices of family members asking them, “when are you going to get a real job?” Mary Gergen refers to these internal “voices that inhabit us” as social ghosts and they have the capacity to haunt, warn or in some cases inspire (Gergen, Schrader & Gergen, 2009, p. 61). These ghosts – apparitions borne of relational conversations – are difficult to shake even when they are no longer physically present or needed. While whispering, “get a real job,” they speak to the concern that the freelancers would have a diminished life without the benefits of a steady paycheck, pension, stock options, health care and essential financial security. The entire workforce in the United States has been flattened by the economic “subprime meltdown” that resulted from mainly subprime mortgage foreclosures and collapsed hedge funds. That big “boo,” the recession coupled with digital expansion, has somewhat quieted the social ghosts; and consequently it is helping to reinvent and change expectations for what is considered a “real job.”

## Changing Expectations in Today’s Economic Landscape

All Americans are trying to pull themselves out from the pileup of unfortunate events including the dot-com crash (2000), September 11, 2001, a subprime meltdown (2005 – 2008) and a global recession (late 2000s). Steven Tatar’s story illustrates the excesses of the dot-com era as he recalls the short-lived insanity as a salaried creative director position at the now defunct marchFIRST in Cleveland, formed in March 2000 and bankrupt in March 2001 – a casualty of the dot-com crash:

*I was meeting all kinds of people who were getting these salaries and jobs titles – whereas at MarchFIRST they didn’t know shit – none of us did. They were tasked with creating the new paradigm – the brave new world – but they didn’t know anything about the world. I remember at marchFIRST having colleagues, creative directors that were so immature – that were so poorly suited to managing a cacophonous, chaotic, entropic, multi-headed, cluster fuck of an organization.*

He adds, *“I had a little more maturity and original discipline having been at American Greetings. I didn’t know it at the time. I thought American Greetings was stodgy, boring, unimaginative, uncreative and risk adverse. I didn’t appreciate the fact that it had a lot of humanity and frankly was a rather mature organization. It was much more so a nurturing and professional environment that developed people in a healthy way for responsibility, change, ownership and leadership. Whereas the dot.com world, man – you just call yourself what you want – print your cards – go see a V.C. at breakfast – get the check at lunch and start buying a ton of fancy office furniture – running around the country on impulse and whim – meeting people in airports all the time – they’re the chief fill-in-the-blank officer of some company that sounds like an African word – and I didn’t know what the company did or what it was for and I thought I must really be dumb. I must be so old and out of it. I meet this guy and I say I don’t know what it’s about but it sounds cool. I couldn’t possibly describe what he did – and neither could he. When marchFIRST threw me overboard and the company went down in flames and the dot-com bubble tanked, I was one of*



*hundreds of thousands of people where the dot-com tide went out real fast and we were stranded. . .”*

Steven Tatar soberly reflects on the way things were and is cautious not to have the same expectations in today's economic landscape:

*CEOs, derivative trading, and flipping house – and stupid money – and dot-com blowups – and all that shit is shit. You know what – enough coke. It was a great high. So what? We were throwing \$700 bottles around at the hot clubs. Big fucking deal. Now I got a hangover and I feel emptier than ever. People want to fill themselves with something that's meaningful, authentic and nourishing to the soul. . .”*

*“. . . After 2000, the economy tanks and I'm freelancing and looking for projects of all types. It included everything from building furniture and doing sculpture commissions here and there as I was able to find them or people were able to find me. We are the tail that the dog wags. For a moment, we felt like we were wagging the dog. Freelancers are absolutely dispensable commodities. Particularly now – and it's such a sellers market for jobs right now. Right now I'm interviewing and looking for jobs – and I've adjusted my expectations. I know I'm not going to have the six figure income that I had back in 2000.*

After developing large-scale freelance projects including the International Children's Games, Steven continues to work on contracted projects but is dually focusing his attention on bringing this new, old vintage knitwear enterprise Ohio Knitting Mills to life. In a Cleveland Institute of Art video, he talks about the merging of his art and entrepreneurial vision, in full display as he reveals his design-savvy Ohio Knitting Mills pop-up location (<http://www.cia.edu/alumni/alumni-profiles/steven-tatar>).

## **Freelance Has Permanently Redefined “Regular” Employment**

Steven and all the project participants represent the new style of “migrant creative” who freely enter different work configurations of contract, salaried, freelance, and entrepreneurial with ease – and some at the same time. Kasumi, a recent Guggenheim recipient, a professor at the Cleveland Institute of Art, is also creating her own videos, working on commissioned digital media projects while also serving as a judge for Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/awards/judges/kasumi>).

Kate Farrell is now a full-time executive producer for WEtv after decades of working freelance for the Olympics and the Super Bowl (<http://www.wetv.com>). Outside of work, Kate delves into with her own independent novel and screenwriting projects. Marc Jaffe, a comedy writer, co-founding a Parkinson research foundation *Shaking With Laughter*, also continues to showcase his play across the country, *Side Effects May Include*, promote his game show, *Bonk*, and merchandise his inventive wine-disappearing Passover Seder cup *Elijah Drinks*.

Bill Cavanaugh, an audio engineer, originally worked full-time for New England Digital with world-class musicians and enterprises like Sting, George Michaels, Gloria Estafan, and

Lucas Film to demonstrate how to interface with the Synclavier system. Now, Bill freelances on a multiple audio projects from M-TV to the History Channel. j

imi izrael, a former Presidential Scholar at Case Western Reserve University, explores teaching venues while continuing to work as a media commentator for NPR's *The Barbershop* (<http://www.npr.org/series/14681732/barbershop>) while promoting his book, *The Denzel Principle: Why Black Women Can't Find Good Black Men* (izrael, 2010) and writing screenplays. Sheryl White, working onsite as an independent contractor at major global advertising agencies for years, also takes on additional freelance copywriting projects.

Ayad Rahim, a journalist and radio commentator continues to write independently, but also has sideline businesses of home renovation and book selling, while pursuing a graduate education in history. These participants are able to traverse multiple career configurations built on the backbone of a strong survival instincts coupled with creative chutzpah – and consequently they are continually reinventing themselves through their work.

The other “Migrant Creative” project participants operate primarily as freelancers and multitask with similar intensity. Laura Paglin, a filmmaker, continues to develop a variety of commercial and documentary projects (<http://www.facingforwardfilm.com/about-the-film/>). Alan McElroy, a screenwriter, just optioned three screenplays for film and works for multiple networks and studios in all phases of production development (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0568416/>). Carol Beck, a videographer for major national accounts, also blogs on a website she created, “*Growing Orbits: Think, Connect, Meditate, Laugh*” (<http://www.carol-beck.com/growing/sample-page>). In addition, Carol's documentary work the Emory-Tibetan Partnership allows her to stay aligned with her Buddhist community overseas and in Atlanta (<http://tibet.emory.edu/>). All of these participants work on multiple levels and are inviting me by example to seek out a richer, more varied, and interesting career.

With our financial recovery in process, our view of the government or corporation as protector has waned and so has our view of a “real job.” It is not surprising to witness a new worker emerging from the rubble at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a sturdier and more resilient contractor, consultant or media freelancer – an interdependent worker who is able to seek and develop projects aligned with their passions and expertise across the diverse terrain of academia, think tanks, corporate, and entrepreneurial domains.

This notion of a steady singular job for relatively long periods of time (e.g. tenure teaching) is now being supplanted with the migratory idea of project-based work, for an agreed upon time, and then moving on to the next watering hole. The media workers involved in this story were essentially pioneering this lifestyle before the rest of the workforce appropriated it. With freelance moving into the forefront, not necessarily by design but by necessity, what it does offer is an alternative option that can stand-alone or complement a variety of work style configurations. A “real job” in the future, like a “regular family,” will present many more work style choices and interdependent initiatives – including shared space, collectivization, bartering, trading, time-sharing, gifting – and more employment arrangements than we could have imagined.

## The Definition Of A “Real Job” Is Expanding

The phrase “real job,” is an agreed upon socially constructed expression, implying a structured job with employee benefits and set wages along with time. Given that one-third of the U.S. workforce is working on a freelance or contract basis and growing, what are their thoughts when they hear the term “real job?” Are their efforts any less real? The expression potentially undermines and disavows the value of another work style option.

This expression “real job” was frequently used by many of the freelancers in my project and even the author Daniel Pink of *Free Agent Nation* uses the metaphor when describing his inability to successfully balance work and family:

Our family tends to fall on the integrator side of the continuum. Or to relabel Nippert-Eng's categories, we don't balance work and family – trade them off against each other. Instead, we're preindustrial. As our offices demonstrate and our daughter understood, we blend work and family. The reason we don't balance is simple. We tried it -- and failed miserably. For more than a year, my wife, Jessica, and I had two real jobs and one real child. (Pink, 2001, p. 185-186)

This metaphor “real job” is so commonplace that we don't recognize how ingrained it is in our work lexicon. Vivian Burr, a social constructionist, suggests that an examination of our taken-for-granted rhetoric “may help us to work towards occupying positions in discourses which are less personally damaging” (Burr, 1995, p. 151). In *Constructing Worlds Together*, the impact of an assumptive narrative is explored:

As you can appreciate, the use of metaphors is enormously important in breaking up our sense of the taken-for-granted. First, when we shift from a conventional to an unconventional form of constructing meaning, we open different possibilities for deliberation and action. For example, if two people are engaged in an angry exchange of opinions, to call it an ‘argument’ in Western culture suggests that there should be a winner and loser. If we call it a ‘dance’ we call attention to the way people are interdependent. The term also suggests that they could step out of their particular pattern and that they are not obliged to dance this way. Second, when our attention is drawn to the metaphoric basis of the way we talk and act, we come to appreciate that our actions could be ‘otherwise.’ Awareness of metaphors frees us to live another way. (Gergen, K., Schrader, S., & Gergen, M., 2009, p. 90)

The examination of the expression “real job” has the potential to help us move towards a more expansive discourse when it comes to employment. One also has to be careful to not overly romanticize the freedom associated with freelance, which is perceived as a more independent work style. Even the notion of “free range,” “free agent” or “independent” is misleading, because freelancers are interdependently inked to their network, community and enterprise as explored in the previous chapter – “*The Liminal Freelance Landscape: Geography, Proximity, and Community*.” On the new work frontier, company loyalty is being replaced by an allegiance to your network of friends who recognize your value and worth. Here a more transient, team-based, relationally driven workforce bound by talent, skills, and improvisational ability is redefining and expanding what it means to have a “real job.”

With more workers graduating from design, film, communication and writing programs – this has already increased the competition in this cohort group. Yet, these individuals are working and in demand because of their experience, professionalism, and level of expertise. With their adaptable natures, they are not looking back but reimagining their next act “even after the current financial fiasco finishes pounding the remains of ‘free agent’ optimism against the wall of harsh circumstances” (Jacoby D., 2009, 650). This is why we can’t squander such a valuable resource because these media makers, even with compressed budgets and delayed paychecks, are still moving forward. What are the challenges, precariousness, and rewards of freelance work? How do these individuals squelch the fear of not knowing when living with economic turbulence and what motivates them? This is helpful for all individuals as more and more businesses are taking on the contractor model. These stories reflect a sobering reality taking hold on the psyche of new economy workers as the dot-com party of “high risk, high reward” crashes – and yet their adaptive abilities are allowing them to creatively live a life in spite of adversity.

## **Freelance Performance Pressure: The Challenges And Adaptations**

The workforce is unbound. There is a shift that is requiring less of an emphasis on hierarchical management and more responsibility is being heaped onto the shoulders of the individual that requires management of self. Rosalind Gill in “*Life As A Pitch*” suggests that what we are witnessing is the emergence of a new worker and management style:

Research on new media work suggests that older, established management practices have little role in contemporary precarious working lives. In their place, a different form of management has taken hold – a management of self, in which power operates not through formal, top-down structures or bureaucratic rationalities but through technologies of selfhood in which a novel form of worker-subjectivity is incited into being. . . In new media work there is a great deal to take care of -- particularly, but not exclusively, for those freelancing or setting up microbusinesses. You are required to train yourself; keep up-to-date; find or create your own work; monitor your progress; compare yourself to others; anticipate what comes next; maintain your distinct reputation; meet deadlines whatever costs they exert on your body or relationships; prepare for contingencies such as illness, injury, or old age; make contacts; network; and socialize – and to do all of this is an atmosphere in which your success or failure is understood in entirely individualistic terms. There is no time when you can switch it off, because all of life has become a ‘social factor’ (Tronti, 1966), an opportunity for work. . . There is no outside to work, as one of the interviewees put it: *Life itself is a pitch*. (Gill as cited in Deuze, 2011, p. 260)

The projects participants echo the sentiments expressed by Rosalind Gill where they not only must deal with constantly upgrading technological skills, leveraging their time and energy, finding their work and negotiating deals, developing and maintaining a social network, and most importantly completing the work in a timely, responsible and personable manner. In addition, they have the precariousness of tighter budgets and deadlines precipitated by the dot-com crash, September 11<sup>th</sup> and heading into the recession. This is

not to say that full-time workers are not reeling in the same manner, but freelancers completely lack the safety net of unemployment compensation.

### **Carol E. Beck (Videographer): Post 9/11 Freelance and Flipping Off The Flip**

There is also the realization for many of these freelancers of the post September 11<sup>th</sup> era that a different kind of expectation is evolving. Carol, a videographer for nationally recognized corporate clients comments on the new freelance and flippantly says, “We want you to work for endless hours for no pay freelance work.” Carol discusses the lesson and high price she paid for holding client expenses post 9/11:

*There was a lot of economic fallout from post 9/11. Companies froze their accounts. I was left holding the bag on thousands of dollars worth of expenses I funded for production. Not only was I not getting paid for those expenses and I wasn't getting paid for the work I already completed. Plus there was no work coming in – so I had no income. It was just a bad time for lots of folks. But I learned a valuable lesson and that was not to front money to clients. This gets annoying when corporate clients want you to subsidize them by fronting expenses. I'm like no – you can cut me a petty cash check right now – just do it.*

Her narrative of being left holding her client's expenses after September 11<sup>th</sup>, is a cautionary tale but one that comes from a place of power because she recognizes that many people were hurt including large companies and that now she must ask her clients to cover their upfront costs. Carol's sense of purposeful “self-agency” allowed her to act in a way that was liberating and open to a conversation which permits her to partner rather than feeling like a pawn with clients (Anderson H. and Gehart, D., 2007, p. 172). Carol's story is a powerful reminder for all freelancers that they have the right and ability to ask for what we need in advance without apologies or subterfuge.

Carol candidly reflects about the impact of the recession and how it was exacerbated by rapid technological changes:

*This recession has been longer, deeper, and more profound. It also coincided with a lot of technology shifts. If another client mentions the world Flip camera to me, I'll throw up. It's like now any idiot can make an HD movie. They don't understand that Flip cameras have terrible audio and they have a fixed lens that can't do anything. It's great if you want to shoot your baby learning to walk. It's not appropriate for large-scale productions that are going to be on a huge screen. There's the perception with all this kind of instant technology that everybody can get Final Cut or Avid Express on their desktop and they think they're an editor. They have a handycam and think they're a shooter. I'm all for making technology available to the proletariat. On the professional side, nobody would think of picking up a musical instrument and playing it within two weeks. People are accepting less on the production values side and they want to push the budget down. There's an erosion of rates because they devalue your work and level of expertise.*

She flips off the accessible Flip camera, which was recently bought out by Cisco, and then suffered an untimely death as described in the *New York Times* article by David Pogue in April 14, 2011 (<http://pogue.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/14/the-tragic-death-of-the-flip/>).

Kodak, considering picking up Cisco's share, did not live long enough to see that dream realized and filed for bankruptcy in January 2012. The Flip's demise demonstrates the swift changes affecting technological enterprise. Carol is quick to point out that having an MFA in film is unusual, but helpful for producer and this kind of technological expertise enhances her work. She comments, *"not having a technical background is the downside for female producers,"* and adds: *"A lot of female producers are notoriously ignorant of the technical side and this infuriates directors and crews. . . .Because they don't have a firm grasp of the technical, it makes it impossible to schedule, budget accurately or crew appropriately."* Although Carol is technologically astute, she advises media makers, and especially women to have a firm grasp of technical skills to succeed as a professional producer.

### **Bill Cavanaugh (Audio Engineer): Freelance Is Missing Backup; Multiple Versions Used To Solve Internal Politics Instead of Expanding Creativity**

Bill Cavanaugh, an audio engineer, is in a business that has been deeply impacted by the technological revolution on multiple levels and is a pioneer in developing a portable work style that allows him to bypass and undercut the traditional recording studio system. He is quick to point out that freelance is missing backup and that is something to consider. It is another reminder of why experienced workers count in an economic downturn since they do not require as much supervision:

*The thing that people most want in studios is backup. They want someone to help them if they get stuck. When you are younger and more inexperienced that makes more of a difference than if you've been in the business 40 years." With a job, the young guys would come to me and say how do I solve this. What I would do is walk over to the console and say something had crashed. Nothing had crashed. Now I'm doing all his routing and doing his job. He's got backup. That's what people want at a company. I don't have it as a freelancer.*

Although we all put a lot of faith into technology and computers, Bill laments that when it comes to audio engineering, the challenge is no longer about creativity but correcting other people's mistakes. Production companies create multiple versions to solve internal political problems and Bill adds, *"So you instead spend time with a producer making a version of the show – then they may want you to use the computer and give them three versions so they can fight it out later."*

The corporate decision-making process, not only extended from the top down but laterally, produces materials that travel through many approval checkpoints and this prolongs the time it takes to get paid. Bill discusses this in the next section *Checks Flying Somewhere*, where he essentially divorced a major media giant because, *"They're bidding low, demanding it immediately, asking for multiple revision – maybe four or five times without compensation -- because it keeps going up the corporate food chain and everyone wants to change it."*

Bill would like to get paid for the multiple versions or overages. He usually finds himself spending more time reworking the mistakes of poor sound quality of film given to him on the front end. He also mentions a lot of underhanded bidding ploys such as, *"Just lower the price on this job by 50% and we'll throw more work your way next time."* Of course,



the work never materializes and they repeat this deception at other studios to substantially reduce costs. The Freelancers Union has an online conversational site to chastise deadbeat clients. Click here to read the “clients gone crazy” discussions (<http://www.freelancersunion.org/advocacy/disqus.html>). As we move freelance from an independent to an interdependent front, these community discussions and advocacy groups have the power to forewarn and organize against deceptive business practices.

### **Alan McElroy (Screenwriter): Technology Has Changed The Film Industry**

Everybody used to have a novel in the drawer and now it's a screenplay. Alan speaks to changes in the film industry:

*We are the most visual we have ever been as a society. Between online and the cinematic experience, there's a hunger for the visual – IMAX, Big Screen TVs, Webisodes, youtube.com. There is the software and technology to build worlds. With graphics arts, you can make your own movies. The success of Open Water, The Blair Witch Project, and Paranormal Activity demonstrates that with an HD camera you can make films yourself for under a millions dollars and get into a festival. A studio sees it – picks it up – it catches fire and booms – you've made a mint.*

Alan knows many of the risk and reward tales that abound in the film industry. A Michael Moore, initially holding bingo games to raise money for his first film, is now a wealthy and recognized documentary filmmaker. The ability to make a movie with very little upfront capital and production expenses, coupled with energetic filmmakers doing the promotional legwork at film festivals, has the large studios looking at these wunderkind films that can maximize profit and buzz with minimal overhead (e.g. *Paranormal Activity*). Alan describes a narrative that is more typical in the industry and that is the difficulty of finding money in this downturn to finance films. This leaves mid-budget films to wither Alan explains:

*There used to be a middle class of movies that got made – usually a character driven mid-budget thriller – the heyday of Michael Douglas films. You don't see that anymore because those films don't make money. The cost to open a movie is so high now. The low end is 25-million for prints and ads. People are spending 100% of the budget just in terms of advertising. If the budget is 100-million, then they are going to spend 100-million in just advertising. The cost is now so they are not going to make a movie where there's risk.*

Alan goes on to talk about how originality is now replaced with proven, branded ideas and talks about how his manager are struggling because the movie industry has shifted:

*It's brutal. I'm not alone. I have an agent and manager. My manager says the same thing – that his clients are struggling because the movie industry has fundamentally shifted. It used to be that the industry needed original ideas. Now the industry is afraid of original ideas and needs everything to be 'branded.' What's it based on? It's based on a comic strip, a novel, and many other things. They're basing movies on 'View-Master,' 'Battleship'. . .based on the success of 'Transformers' – suddenly all these toy companies like Hasboro, Mattel want a movie around it.*

The studios will cherry-pick the best films on the festival circuit but are hesitant to finance the mid-budget films and this is producing extreme filmmaking according to Alan McElroy:

*You see 160-million dollar movies like 'Inception.' Chris Nolan is the brand – 'Dark Knight,' 'Batman Begins.' You'll have a 160-million movie being made – or you have a 'Paranormal Activity.' You have a movie that somebody made on their own for \$15,000 dollars or a studio made for 160-million. You have all these people struggling to find the financing. International financing has dried up so finding money is the hardest thing for an independent.*

Alan currently has three movies optioned right now but whether they can move to the screen is a different story. He wrote the movie "Tekken" (2010), originally a videogame, and the movie did not get released because of high distribution costs to take it to market. Alan adds, "now they can't get distribution because it costs 25-million to do print and ads to just get a movie on its feet. Nobody wants to put the money out there." The videogames movies (e.g. "Street Fighter" and "DOA") have underperformed. Although the film was released in Japan and other areas in Europe, Alan doesn't think it is going to be distributed in the U.S and says, "They make all of the money from the videogame. The film for them is just another advertising tool. Nobody wants to put the money at risk so you end up with a film that cost 20-million to make and it probably ends up going to DVD." Click to view trailer for "Tekken" (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0411951/>).

Alan McElroy's advice is not to follow the pack and chart a different course:

*You have to be tactical. You have to adapt. As the industry changes, you have to learn how to change with it. A lot of times somebody says, 'nobody wants to buy Westerns or don't write a Western.' That's exactly the time to write a Western – when nobody else is doing it – it's time to do that. As a writer in general, you have to be writing for yourself. When you start writing to suit the industry, it's the tail wagging the dog. You're chasing mist and it's too easy to do. One of the reasons I'm glad I don't live in L.A. is that everybody is talking about the latest development deal or specs for sale.*

Alan advises someone starting out to explore public domain because you can remake an idea (e.g. fairy tale) and make it your own. He must be doing something right because his film *Man and Wife* was grabbed in a bidding war by *X-Men* producer Ralph Winter and Akiva Goldsman, who wrote *A Beautiful Mind* and *Cinderella Man*, is attached to direct.

### **Bill Cavanaugh (Audio Engineer): Pimp My Mac and Making New Tracks; Over-the-Horizon Radar**

Bill Cavanaugh witnessed the centralization of recording industries when they moved to the large cities, then watched them subdivide, multiplex for revenue, and then virtually collapse. I asked how he managed to stay viable and working:

*Resilience. I keep getting up and going back to it again. It's an instinct thing of seeing the change in the industry before the industry sees it – I made the move and went to market early with my system – but I was one of the first and lonely ones there. And then when it started to happen (referring to industry collapse) people*



*said 'Bill's been at this for five years.' That helped. That is why I instinctively thought I'm gong to show people how to do it because there's more work out there than I'm able to do. It validates the market and it's an easier sale for me. There are five guys out there doing it. I forced myself into a working model that was different than an industry that was collapsing and I did it in the 80s – did it with Midi – and having enough time and experience to say I've seen this before. My instinct said the same thing that happened in the 80s is happening again. . . .The over-the-horizon radar thing is part of the instinctual mechanism that a freelancer must have. You may see it – come up with the wrong idea and fail. Guys like Edison who were very strong instinctual people believed it was 99 percent perspiration and one percent inspiration. They worked from ideas. He said, 'I can take the electromagnetic current idea and can replace candle making' – and created the light bulb. How did he put that together?*

Bill Cavanaugh is self-taught and with off the shelf objects could literally maximize and 'pimp' his Mac for increasing interface soundtrack performance:

*When I went to work for New England Digital – helped to build the Synclavier and interface design – I was part of a team that was creating this technology. Then there were off the shelf objects that were meant to do a certain – like record or edit audio – but if you brought it together in a certain way with other pieces of equipment – you could exponentially expand its power. I just saw how all that would work. When I realized the Mac had reached the point that it could handle the job – at least up to 32 tracks – we were working up to 16 digitally on hard disk up until then. And I had already doubled the tracks of the multi-track HD system. Then all these software modules called plug-ins came along and there were equalizations, reverbs – a lexicon reverb unit costs 40,000 dollars. I go out and buy a reverb plug-in and it would cost me 500.*

Bill, as a freelancer, was thinking about expediency and portability and not the sociability of a system. I was curious as to why more engineers did not adapt early on and he surmises:

*The reason many did not adapt is that the guys who are 30, 40 and 50 still working in the business want the big mixing console to impress the client. And the person coming in the room every 15-minutes –saying, 'can I get you anything?' They like the glamour of it. I'm at a certain point in my career when I don't need it anymore. I haven't had a demo reel in ten years. It's time for me to start taking the money home – instead of saying no I'll take low paying jobs so I can work with cool equipment. No, No. I'm going to work with the equipment I need to do the job and charge less.*

Bill is quick to point out that the studios changed the system by trying to do audio within the video editing system and notes, "because AVID was selling those editors by saying you can now do audio too. But implementation was very rudimentary and never gave them the proper gauging, metering or any of the specs they needed."

He was showing the industry a model for audio that was more flexible and affordable and had to pitch the resistant studios that had been initially sold the idea by AVID that "now you can do audio too." As Bill noted, "They would try and mix the show inside the video

system and it would not pass the technical evaluations.” He worked hard to convince the studios that they did have an audio budget:

*So if you can get the same guy you had in the studio and get it delivered for a third of what you were paying. Would you go for it? Again they’d say, ‘we don’t have an audio budget.’ I’d say you do have an audio budget. You’re just using it on a video system and tying up that video system for a week to do the audio. I can do it in a day and that video system can move on to the next video project. That’s why you’re behind on everything. Let me inject my company into the system and I will get it done in a day or two days – and it will pass tech evaluation and it won’t be bounded back over and over. And you won’t spread it out over a month. It will be a job that gets done in a few days – goes to tech evaluation – and you’ll get a paper back saying you passed. They went for it.” Who went for it? Bill answers, “A & E went for it – Biography went for it – The History Channel went for it – MTV went for it at the time. PBS did. Court TV did. Now they’re True TV. Many did.*

Bill created a compelling win-win scenario to entice his clients by saying you will not only pass your audio inspection quicker, free up your system for other projects, but it will cost less than what you have been paying. As a consequence, his business narrative has improved with an expanded client base; but a persistent problem has emerged and that is slow and delayed payments that are threatening his livelihood. This is theme that will be continued in the section *Checks Flying Somewhere*.

### **jimi izrael (Cultural Critic and Writer): Technology Has Devalued His Work by 60 Percent**

When asked how technology has changed his work, jimi is quick to point out at first that on a logistics level it has gotten better. But then he discusses how being an opinion writer has not been helpful with blogging and Internet content coming to the forefront:

*It’s gotten better. I remember when I first started freelancing – I had to type stuff at my house, run to Kinkos, then fax it to the editor, and get to a pay phone and find out if they got it. Then I had to go through the process again and edit, print it out, and fax it. It used to be an eight-hour process. Now it’s a one-hour process. So the technology is great in that way. The market has changed. It used to be that you’d get the five or six hundred up to a thousand for an opinion. Now you can get 250 or 220. The most I’ve made off an opinion was for 6600 for a piece I wrote about Bill Cosby with all the syndication. You can’t make that kind of money now. Everyone can and does give their opinion so it’s different now.*

Because everyone essentially is offering their opinions for free, the value of writing has decreased substantially and jimi reveals, “Yeah, the market in my opinion has devalued about 60 percent since 2003 or 2004.” jimi is realistic enough to see the writing on the wall and continues working on his projects while attempting to secure employment teaching film and creative writing. His advice to students is candid, heartfelt, and he has the courage to speak the truth about what has happened in journalism:

*These kids need to invent something – the next Google or iPhone app. There are just no jobs in media. These managers are holding onto their seats at newspapers*

– and they're just biting their nails every day just waiting for the pink slip. It's just a matter of time. These newspapers are just bleeding money. It's sick. Profits are down eight percent and people who are making six figures are the people that are going to go first -- but the mailroom clerk. . .” jimi then segues to the guy working in the mailroom. “There’s this joke I have about black people who work in mailrooms or as custodians – those are some of the most secure jobs there are. Those people don’t have an education at all. But there’s always going to be a floor that needs to be washed or mail that needs to be delivered. You know the mailroom guy that you’re laughing at today with the headphones and ‘afro’ – he’ll be there years and years and years after you’re gone. He’ll be the one with the gold watch. I know this for a fact. There’s this guy I used to work with . . .about ten years ago – and when I was there he had been there for eight years. Now flash forward ten or fifteen years later and he’s a VP – because after awhile they have to give you another title – but he’s still in the mail room and he has been there fifteen or twenty years. People are thinking that’s really sad or pathetic – but at least he has a job. He knows he’s going to be there.

When asked about what kind of lessons he could offer an up-and-coming creative writer or freelancer he notes:

*I would tell them to go work at Starbucks. I’m just lucky. I just happen to know what I’m doing. I wouldn’t try to make a living freelancing. I wouldn’t encourage anybody to make a living freelancing. I’d tell them to get a job at Starbucks. Write at night. Write first thing in the morning. Make tea or a small mocha the rest of the day.*

I comment, “That’s harsh.” He responds as only jimi can, “There’s some PhD’s working there right now that are really happy.” jimi is confident of his own self-mastery gained through years of experience and having a track record as a creative writer, cultural critic and producer of articles, blogs, and books. He carefully warns young people entering the business to consider the safety net of working a salaried job to stabilize while nostalgically referencing the iconic mailroom or janitorial position as a reminder of an economy that once provided stability.

The challenges and adaptations that they participants mentioned still allow them to work in the business but the one thing that none of them were quite prepared for was the extended time it takes to get paid.

## Checks Flying Somewhere: The Precarious Waiting Game

Although the time required to complete the work is compressed, the one thing extended is the time it takes to get paid. Daniel Pink, author of *Free Agent Nation*, discusses in a TED Talk that we need to rethink 20<sup>th</sup> century thinking of reward and punishment at work as being outmoded. Pink stresses that workers want “autonomy, mastery, and purpose” and this is way to motivate workers as expressed in the following TED video ([http://www.ted.com/talks/dan\\_pink\\_on\\_motivation.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_pink_on_motivation.html)).

For many freelancers engaged with this project – they already have the work trifecta of autonomy, master, and purpose but what they were not prepared to encounter since September 11<sup>th</sup> is the delayed movement of freelance payments from one month to six months. These freelancers are fortunate to have strong professional portfolios and creative work they enjoy. For them, the carrot of getting paid on time is critical to their survival. The secondary concern of course is that the wages have substantially been reduced or stayed the same when the cost of living has dramatically increased.

jimi izrael, a freelance writer and cultural critic, with a show on National Public Radio, *The Barbershop* and a recently published book garnering lots of buzz notes some of the challenges of freelance and that includes “*waiting for checks flying through the mail.*” I ask if they’re really flying? He describes the waiting game:

*Flying somewhere. You just have to wait for them. Playing that game and paying taxes. There’s a lots of pros and cons to it. I have more freedom. I can travel and do whatever I want. Money is a big part of my stress life.”* He adds, “*There’s nothing but content online. That’s why nobody is paying for it. It’s just about finding the right content.*

jimi mentioned a staggering 60-percent reduction in his wages in the last four years and that is due to the crowdsourcing of online content. There are also plenty of individuals who provide free Internet content in order to promote their expertise, DVD, game, company or book.

The waiting game is a common refrain from freelancers who find the time period drawn out until a check actually arrives. Bill Cavanaugh recently divorced a major media giant and told them he doesn’t want to work with them anymore:

*They’re bidding low, demanding it immediately, asking for multiple revision – maybe four or five times without compensation -- because it keeps going up the corporate food chain and everyone wants to change it. What used to be net 30-day billing is now 140-days and then you get shortchanged. They are late almost every time. It is a way for them to float their money because of their own uncertainty with the economy. Bad morality is becoming standard. It keeps going down the food chain because if I am hired by another freelancing company – they can’t pay me until they’re paid. Even the billing is freelanced to other companies and you have to wait for them to send the invoices back to the original company and this adds even more time.*

When I ask Bill if social planning would help, he immediately relates the Soviet system’s social planning that never worked or our governments one-size-fits-all approach to work. Bill finds freelance preferable to full time employment because at least you are used to the precariousness rather than all of a sudden finding yourself out on the street. He has seen the industry radically change in 2007 and get exponentially worse in 2009 due to the economic downturn. Although, he considers taking a part-time job so he can have some time to evaluate if he wants to continue on the freelance path.

As more people turn to freelance or contract by default, I am seeing more seasoned freelancers entertaining the idea of creating a business or securing full-time employment, as is the case with Steven Tatar, a freelancer and president/creative director of Ohio Knitting Mills. He sighs and says with an exasperated tone:

*I'll spend hours telling a client exactly what I do, how long it's going to take, what they're going to get. I can spend hours developing a proposal – the result of which is 104,000 dollars and fifty-cents for this engagement. They're shocked. "For what, air?" I realize that if I have to work so hard to explain it – then it's not worth it. If they don't get it in 5-minutes – they won't get it in 5-hours.*

"I'm burnt out and working constantly," acknowledges Steven. We discuss how he is sitting on a gold mine and Steven answers, "no question." Ohio Knitting Mills (<http://www.ohioknittingmills.com/>) has been featured in many international fashion magazines:

*Several Japanese, Chinese, Italian, French – I've gotten calls from Fossil, Levis, WP Lavori, Pendleton, and all these companies are interested but somebody needs to take a step.. It would take nothing for Levis – I know they've shrunk and had a tough time – but they're doing well again. They're still a 4-billion company. They can take a couple of million dollars out from between the cushions of their couch and launch this company and just say, 'We'll throw a couple of million at you and here's our goals.*

Steven is taking a big step and moving from freelancer to entrepreneur and although tired, he excitedly talks about this venture:

*The next frontiers are not the Wild West. It's not the Gold Rush – which was the origin of Levis. What can we discover in the left behinds? What is it in our cities and urban places and our former industrial places in the mines – in the manufacturing – that is beautiful? Yes, it's neglected but it's not something to throw away. This is our soul. This is the essence of who we are. We need to embrace it – put it back together and put our future together.*

What Steven innately gets is that our future is together and that drives a philosophical stance that is posed for partnership so he can develop relationships "that allow all parties to access their creativities and develop possibilities where none seemed to exist before" (Anderson, H. and Gehart, D., 2007, p. 25). A reminder of how critical it is to pay attention to our language and conversations, because it not only sets the stage for our actions but also invites others to participate in a shared joint action.

## **Erosion of Rates and Production Values; Working Without A Contract**

Carol discusses that in this deadline driven business, with clients demanding that if you do more and more in less time, then the possibility of diminishing returns set in. She explains:

*Every jerk on the planet thinks they can pick up a camera and mouse – and become a shooter and an editor. There's a dumbing down of taste because of a proliferation*

*of things like “YouTube.” People are accepting less on the production values side and they want to push the budget down. There’s an erosion of rates because they devalue your work and level of expertise. Somebody like my friend Bill who is an absolute camera magician does extraordinarily creative work – he has had an absolute struggle to maintain his rate. He’s probably making 20% of what his rate should be.*

I ask Carol if she has seen her rates change? She responds with candor:

*There was a time when pushing my rate up actually improved the demand for me. There was the perception that if you charge more you must be really good. With the law of supply and demand, you become more sought after. With the recession, there was the mad scramble to just keep paying your mortgage. Especially the last year – people were really trying to compress the rates and take me back to 2002 rates. I did a couple of jobs where I really compressed my rate.*

Carol was also gracious to disclose her day rate since I was being nosey. Although it may sound like a lot of money to the uninformed, this is with 20+ years of professional experience working for major national clients and on large-scale productions. Additionally, there is the reminder that freelance work does not happen on a daily basis and is sporadic at best:

*My day rate for pre-pro and post supervision is \$800 for ten-hours of work. For shoot days it’s \$850 for ten. People wanted me to work for \$600. Which in the grand scheme of the world is not a bad rate in the sense that it sure beats slinging burgers. But at the same time, what people don’t understand – the government gets 30% right off the top. I have to pay my own social security (FICA) at 6% and then the employer pays 6% -- so I have to pay 12%. Then I have to pay 100% of my health insurance and 100% of my retirement benefits. That money doesn’t go very far. You can see that I drive a car with 193,000 miles and I live in a two-bedroom condo. I’m not getting rich.*

The good news is that Carol’s attentiveness to her own personal budgeting and finances is also extended to maximize her client’s production. Her realization that overtime is not only a budget killer but also diminishes the performance of a crew is what endears her to both clients and crew.

*It’s often better and cheaper to schedule three-day shoots than two-days that go into massive overtime. There’s that kind of pressure. They think we’ll get it done in two days. The truth is, given what they have to cover, it would be two fifteen-hour days so you might as well schedule three ten-hour days. This way people can be fresher and you’re not paying out the ass for overtime.*

Bill candidly responds that risk has always been part of the business and whether the pay scale compensates for the precariousness of being self-employed:

*The fact of the matter is that there’s always been a risk and the risk is increasing in this business. If you work for a company – you don’t see the risk elements because you have a steady paycheck. You don’t see the big elephant charging until the boss comes in and says I’m laying you off. You’re not ready for it. I have to be that chases down the money without pissing the client off and keeping it friendly. I*

*know what the true financials are. I did a job in December and they didn't pay me until May. So that becomes an issue. You have to chase the work down, do the work, and then you chase the money down.*

Kate Farrell when interviewed in the summer of 2010 was a freelancer, for the Olympics and the Super Bowls, and is now an executive producer for WE-tv. She was candid about the major change she's seen over the years and that is working without a contract:

*This is something a little bit new. When I worked with NBC as a freelancer from 1994 to 1998 and from 1998 to 2000 I was staff and from 2000 to 2002 I was freelance again. But I typically had some letter of agreement about what I was doing and the rate I would be paid. This is hire and fire at will. The only person who had a contract was the executive producer who had a contract with the network for "x" number dollars to deliver a show.*

Kate acknowledges that working without a contract is becoming de rigueur and states, "Of course, there are positions that require contracts or agreements. But my job wasn't one of them," where she was referring to working as an executive producer on the reality show *Raising Sextuplets*.

Bill Cavanaugh also concurs that people rarely sign contracts or work orders. The work orders were sent from the studio to network so they could check against the invoice. This happens less and less because of emails where people are acknowledging the time and work put into a job. Bill suggests that you should always hang on to the emails in case there is a dispute with work direction, time, or monies.

This refrain of waiting for the money has been a common theme for many of the freelancers and it is a major consideration if they want to remain self-employed. It is imperative that media companies recognize that the delay of payment or they will be hiring inexperienced second-tier workers instead of seasoned professionals who treat themselves like a business.

## **It Is A Relational Business; Personal Relationships Are Tested**

Ohio Knitting Mills entrepreneur Steven Tatar discusses the importance of partnership:

*Partnerships are so important. The bottom line is that freelance is not an end to itself. It's where you live. It's like having a one-bedroom apartment. It doesn't mean you sleep alone. It's still a team sport. You still need company. By nature, we're social people.*

Although social and relational skills are critical to securing professional gigs, the dramatic irony is that freelancers' relational skills are often tested on the home front. Independent media contractors have unpredictable schedules where they head into a black hole for extended periods of time and resurface after a few weeks. Your friends have to understand what you do for a living or they will be disappointed. This disappointment is

what Kate Farrell, a successful media producer, experienced as a freelancer when she missed important family engagements:

*The sports freelance life was not conducive to many of the women I knew unless they were already married. I sacrificed a lot for the jobs in terms of relationship. I missed the birth of my friend's daughter – I was supposed to be in the deliver room. I missed my niece's graduation because I was interviewing Aretha Franklin. I was supposed to interview Aretha on Saturday for the daytime Emmy's and she didn't show up. I had a hotel room all set up and lit and the crew and I just waited around. She arrived and said 'honey I thought it was tomorrow.' It was a mix up between her and her agent. She invited me to dinner with her crew. I didn't go because I was mad that I was going to miss my niece's graduation. Duh, I feel stupid about that now. But I loved what I was doing. I still missed a lot of my family's life. I also never got married. Part of it I didn't meet the right guy. The other part was that I was always on the road. I don't regret that – but it was a factor.*

Kate recalls a story about how a friend dumped her for being that unpredictable friend:

*Yeah, actually I had a friend dump me because I was never around. I knew her when I was living in Brooklyn. She was someone who had been diagnosed with cancer in her 30's, so she had a real passion for life and she was not settling for anything in life anymore. She just had to live her best life. And I was always going to the Olympics – back and forth – and when I came back I called her and she said, 'what's up?' She said, "you're not around . . . you're inconsistent. . . and I can't depend on you."*

Kate acknowledges, *"I think she was right. Yes, I was inconsistent. Yes, my life was kind of exciting. But the truth is, you're in a hotel room by yourself and your friends can't count on you."* She is quick to respond, *"I have had friends who have remained friends thought it because they know I'm just doing my job and following a passion."*

Later I inquire, "Do you think freelancers are restless by nature or restless because they are freelancers?" Kate answers:

*I think restless by nature. Because a lot of my friends who had been freelancers have dropped it, are people who prefer security. They need to know that they're going to be home in Brooklyn or Manhattan on a Friday night doing blah, blah, blah. Or they have a family now. They can't take on a gig unless they build an edit room in their garage. You have to be independent, a self-starter, and you have to go with the flow. I have some friends who live in L.A. who are freelancers. When they're not working, they just enjoy themselves. They go to the gym. . .run in the Canyon. . . they enjoy life while they can. But it's a different life. It's definitely a different life.*

During our interview, I asked Kate if she would consider a full-time job? She replied, *"I would totally consider it – absolutely. I'd probably not do it for 20-years – but I'd do it for five years. I find that the problem I have with that kind of work is that mediocrity sets in."* It was not long after this interview (2011) that Kate moved into a full-time position as an executive producer at WE-tv.



Carol admits that there are just times when she hibernates for extended periods of time and reemerges after a few weeks. Friends have to understand what you do for a living or they will be disappointed:

*People who know me and care about me just know there are times when I got into black holes and will emerge. Typically, it's very rare that I'm in a black hole for more than two weeks. When I'm in very heavy production mode, I get up at 5:30 AM to crunch numbers and take care of correspondence before the phone starts ringing. Then I have to do paperwork, then a full day or work, and go into the evening. The 13 – 15 days doesn't go on forever. The converse of that is that there are days when I may work one or two hours.*

Although not married, Carol is quick to point out that a conversation about freelance and family should be considered:

*This doesn't pertain to me as a single person. I don't have a live-in partner or children. I think it's a lot easier to be a freelancer. Freelancing with a family is a whole other can of worms. I have friends who are single parents. I know couples who are both freelancers. It requires a lot of negotiations within families. I have good friends who were both freelancers until they decided to have a child. It's too risky with health insurance. One of them needed to get a job.*

For the men and women involved with this project, the undercurrent for everyone is that their professional relationships are on solid ground. However as freelancers, the women have more trouble balancing their personal relational needs with work-related areas because of time constraints. They have sacrificed more in terms of not having a traditional family structure. Laura, is the only married woman in this group, and acknowledges that she is fortunate to pursue projects of interest because of the stability of her husband providing health insurance and a steady paycheck. Carol, involved in a committed relationship but without a live-in partner or children, previously pointed out that it makes it easier for her to freelance. Kate has already suggested that her freelance lifestyle has taken a toll on her relationships and has switched to full-time. Sheryl is unencumbered and that makes it easier to freelance.

Kasumi is the only woman in the group with a child. She freelanced when her son was younger so she could champion his involvement with acting and film. It is no accident that her son Kitao was honored as one of the top 25 new independent filmmakers in 2011 as revealed in *Filmmaker magazine* (<http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/news/people/kitao-sakurai/>) or that Kasumi would receive a prestigious Guggenheim award (<http://kasuminews.com/page/2>). As noted in *Outliers*, it takes 10,000 hours for someone to develop proficiency in their craft and time or practice added to talent is the essential part of the success equation (Gladwell, 2008).

Four of the six men involved with this project are married and all have children except for one. None of the men mentioned freelance imposing on their family, except in terms of location, and they saw it in a positive light because of having accommodating partners who understood their career.

The destabilizing effect of freelance is more difficult with children because of time constraints and described by Rosalind Gill in *Life Is A Pitch*:

*Round-the-clock working in order to finish a project did not suit all workers, and this was perceived as a particular problem for those with or contemplating having – children. . . . Perhaps not surprisingly, studies have indicated the very small proportion of women in new media who have children (Batt et al, 1999; Gill & Dodd, 2000), and this was also the case in my own research – a finding that resonates with discussions of the emergence of more complex inequalities in other creative industries (including journalism and academia) (Gill, R. & Deuze, 2011, p. 258).*

Mark Deuze, an Indiana University Telecommunications Professor, examines the new practice of some manufacturing industries adopting the creative industries model of significantly downsizing labor costs and putting the burden of healthcare, benefits, vacations, and retraining on the employee. In a radio podcast with host Deb Kent on WFHB radio (May, 2009), Deuze describes how the adoption of a creative model in manufacturing comes at a steep price and could contribute to more unraveling of the already fragile family structure (<http://www.wfhb.org/news/interchange-mark-deuze-living-media>):

One thing they have is a style of management of organizing the work that you see now other industries, including the American car industry adopting. For example. . . one thing we've seen American manufacturers doing in the last couple of years is buying out the contracts of their employees. That doesn't mean firing them. It means that everyone works. . . but they are no longer contracted employees. That means that employer – Ford or Chrysler. . . cannot be held responsible for them anymore. They're being paid on a week-by-week, month-to-month, or even project-by-project or a season-by-season basis. They can be let go at any moment. Nobody is required to invest in them – for instance training for new technologies is done on their own time. . . That is exactly the model that Hollywood has been adopting for the last 50-years or so.

This downgrading of labor costs and incentives is becoming more commonplace in the rest of the workforce and the Hollywood model, coming to a business near you, has no qualms about leaving contracts behind:

. . . even if you have a contract which many people don't – if you get fired or as the industry says, 'go on hiatus.' You spend a couple of months out of work and then the producer will call you back on the set – and sometimes they don't call -- even if you have a two or three contract – you're out of a job. You have no power. (Interchange, 2009).

The lack of contractual obligation is considered the ticket you pay for being part of an exciting creative workforce but the same model is now being applied to other more staid industries and it is challenging the way we see work as a way to take care of our family comments Deuze when featured in Kent's *Interchange* radio segment "*Mark Deuze Living With Media*" (Interchange, 2009).

Everyone accepts that – it's part of the game – that's what you do. It's the price you pay for doing this awesome kind of work. Like a lot of media professionals tell me, 'I can't believe I'm getting paid to do this. I get to work with this actor.' It's wonderful and it's awesome but it comes at a price and the price is that all the things we traditionally associate with what it means to be a worker – especially in this country where politicians including President Obama – make such a big deal out of the pride of work – of having a job and taking care of your family – it comes with a context of values. Your work is something you have for a long time. It comes with benefits, pays healthcare, and gives you some time to go on holiday with your loved ones. It trains you to work on the new machine. That is out of the window. With the decline of the manufacturing industry, the whole idea of what work means is disappearing and in its place is the idea of what work means in the creative industries. That means something you do in order to do what you want to do. (Interchange, 2009)

Hollywood is about speculative returns and Deuze describes a new work reality that is being appropriated by more businesses essentially reducing the biggest cost of business, which is labor. This reality is not a Hollywood happy ending the American worker envisioned:

Let's say you have the idea for the most amazing movie ever. You start writing scripts -- and you finally finalize and get an agent and you send it out. You wait for a year or two years and then somebody picks it up. Somebody pays you money maybe – maybe not. Five or six years later Spielberg sees it and says you know what – that's the movie I'm going to make and you're going to get a million bucks. . . What happened in the those six years from you writing the script to Spielberg picking it up? Did anybody pay you during that time? No. Most of the work gets done without anybody taking any responsibility for that – including paying somebody to do it – it's called working on spec. . . It's very exciting but if you want to work in media this is your reality. That's wonderful for big corporations or companies that really don't want to pay their employees. But they have all these people that even want to work for free just to get a shot. . .

. . . The biggest expense for any industry is its labor force. The one reason the creative industry is doing so well is because it doesn't really employ anybody anymore. So Hollywood is singing and dancing of doing so well -- part of the reason because of outsourcing – the way the contracts are organized – the costs for labor have gone completely down. We've all heard the stories about the Screen Actors strike -- the Writer's Guild strike – Hollywood in turmoil -- it's about all the stuff we're talking about here. That model has perks – you get to do what you're passionate about and that's awesome – but it comes at a price and it's being transported to all the other industries. And I wonder if we are truly realizing what that price is? (Interchange, 2009).

Deuze is suggesting that adopting the creative industries approach will inevitably change

the structure of the nuclear family and notes, “the family is based on the idea of permanence, sending your kids to school, and it’s impossible if you’re always moving to the next place and never have a steady income” (Interchange 2009). Click to listen to the entire Mark Deuze interview with host Deb Kent WFHB Radio podcast, (<http://www.wfhb.org/news/interchange-mark-deuze-living-media>):

With the current economic structure of media depending on a contingent workforce, the consideration of media as a career should be weighed if you are not self-propelled or do not have a practice that allows you to recalibrate or reach out to friends, family and community (e.g. spiritual renewal, meditation, yoga, exercise, etc.). The prescription for relaxation and social inclusion is critical for all forms of work but for freelancers it is essential to spend time connecting with others for both professional and personal enhancement. If you are balancing the needs of family, it is important to consider the precarious nature of the business in terms of time, scheduling, and budget.

## The Rewards: Compensation Is More Than Monetary

### **Carol Beck (Videographer): “If I’m Going To Work For Someone That’s Messed Up – I’m Going To Work For Me”**

Carol Beck initially wanted to be an independent filmmaker and also have an academic career. There was a short period of time when she did both before becoming a tenure casualty. *“I decided to not pursue academia at the time even though I loved and enjoyed teaching. With an academic teaching background, Carol needed to prove that her production skills could translate to the commercial world:*

*I decided to come to Atlanta and I tried to find work. It became clear that I was absolutely overqualified for anything that was an interim job. No one in the industry could extrapolate my academic experience as it applied to doing production work in the quote unquote ‘real world’ – and I would go through all these machinations – yes, I handled budgets – yes, I handled equipment rooms and on and on. I was 33 and then I finally was hired by a woman who ran a small production company at a wage that was less than what I made as an adjunct my first year out of college – so this is ten years later. So I essentially decided to look at it as a paid internship so I could figure out how the production community worked in Atlanta. Otherwise, I was going to make myself crazy because the woman I was working for was intelligent. However, she had absolutely no management skills and was not a good director. Again, it became an absolutely untenable position and I decided to hang on because I needed to survive. She didn’t fire me for bad performance. She let me go because she felt like ‘I wasn’t a good fit anymore.’*

Carol stresses, *“She wanted someone she could boss around and I wasn’t that person. A friend I had made at this small production started helping me find freelance jobs as a production coordinator. That’s where I started out. I’ve always had a natural organizational mind so that all went quite well very quickly. Those were boom times too (1996).”* Carol comments, *“After my experience in academia and the woman in Atlanta, I was sick of*

*working for neurotic, messed up, controlling people. If I'm going to work for someone that's messed up – I'm going to work for me. I want to choose the projects that I work on."*

### **Carol Beck (Videographer): Choice and Flexibility**

Carol is a compassionate freelancer and reveals:

*I used to feel little sympathy for clients sometimes. I thought they should educate themselves to the process, spend more time with it and stop being so neurotic. I'm like buck up and take some responsibility. I realize that people on the client side of corporate production have a whole lot of other responsibilities. They can't be production professionals and that's why they hire you. You've got to educate them to the process and that requires a whole lot of patient getting their attention. You have to explain why they are critical to the production. You have to feel for their position. They're scared from their bosses. That's another reason to be a freelancer because the boss is you. I can also choose who I work for.*

*"Flex time is important because what people don't realize about your job is the stress and hours involved."* Carol expresses what many freelancers recognize and that's the flexibility to take time off and says:

*I couldn't possibly exist on two-weeks of vacation a year. I don't want to work more than 42 weeks a year. I'll be 50 next year -- I want the flexibility to look after my folks – gallivant off to India to do something I want – and to help other people. I like the fact that I can do a meditation retreat and just hang out with friends from time to time. When you're self-employed, you're never off 100%.*

### **Bill Cavanaugh (Audio Engineer): Sitting On Top Of The Pooh Pile; The New Freelance is Starting Your Own Company**

When asked if he was doing better as a freelancer he replies, *"The people on staff are walking around proud. Whatever it is they are climbing to the top of the pooh pile. I did too and realized when I was on the top of it that I was covered with shit. It wasn't really worth it and I was going home with less money every day."*

Bill would attest that there is a new type of freelance emerging and he immediately states, *"Starting your own company. Not working freelance in the sense that you take a temporary job and work for three months. Basically I'm a vendor. Right now, until we find out what will happen with the financial reform and Obama's tax code – I might have to close my subchapter S Corporation because I'll be overtaxed – double taxed – and I'll be back in "Stupidville." I might be better off working as an individual – keep the name RazorMix – but you technically won't be a corporation. As Bill states, "You have to work the tax regimen the same way the wealthy do."*

### **Kasumi (Experimental Filmmaker): Freelance is Like The Film Festival Shorts**

As a freelancer, you have a lot more irons in the fire and you don't feel stuck. Kasumi compares freelance to the film festival shorts, *"if one really sucks, you know it will be over*

*soon, and if you love the people, you have the knowledge that maybe it will happen again and you can nurture that and make more things happen."*

### **Sheryl White (Copywriter): Changing Loyalty to People Not Companies; Becoming Bobbi Kaplan**

What drives Sheryl is the work but on her own terms. She doesn't want to be a casualty of workplace politics and says:

*Years ago companies treated you with respect – more like family. Today you could be at a company for 30-years and they'll walk in your office and say you're fired – tell you to leave immediately – and they'll escort you out. In the old days, they'd give you an office for a month. They sure don't do that now.*

She really does not want to work full-time for a company even though about half want her to work full time. She says, "I don't really want to go there. In fact, some of the creative freelancers who bring me in for freelance know that I don't want to – so they don't even try to offer me full-time work. Sheryl reminisces:

*I remember there was this one freelancer named Bobbi Kaplan and the woman always worked. We always hired her. She was great. I thought I'd like to be her one day. She always had work no matter what was happening in the economy. She was always busy and nice (LAUGH). . .I've become her kind of. . .*

Sheryl consciously chose this path as a form of self-preservation. It gives individuals a greater sense of control over the choice of projects and coworkers.

### **Laura Paglin (Documentarian): Storytelling – Revealing the Invisible**

For Laura, the greatest joy is telling stories that would not normally get told, "Showing the world something they wouldn't normally see. Exposing a problem – sharing a character from a different walk of life," like meeting the legendary Cleveland councilwoman Fannie Lewis in her documentary *No Umbrella: Election Day in the City* (<http://www.noumbrella.org/>).

### **Steven Tatar (Designer, Creative Director and Entrepreneur): Embracing A Creative Community**

For Steven, freelance is about having access to a kindred, independent creative community and states:

*It's about the benefit – emotional, the profession, and sometimes even financial as a reflection of oneself. It's about the creative process – the noise in your head – not between you and yourself – but amongst people who resonate with me is the single most important element.*

## **Kate Farrell (Executive Producer): Geography, Relationship, Money and Interest**

Kate Farrell describes the factors she considers essential to freelance which include geography, relationship, money and interest:

*When you freelance, you actually have a choice about what you will work on. Sure, you worry about money but if the subject really doesn't interest you, you don't have to take the job. If you're lucky enough to have some money in the bank you ask, "What am I passionate about? What do I want to do a show about?" Somebody might call me and say I want you to do a video on my theatre company. No, no thanks not interested. So interest is a factor.*

## **Alan McElroy (Screenwriter): It's a Relationship Business**

Alan discusses how relationships make the work sustainable:

*It's all about relationships. So and so really likes you and wants to talk about such and such. Do you remember them? I've been in the business now for over 20 years. I'll be in a meeting and some guy will say you probably don't remember me but I brought you coffee when I worked for so and so. You network with people. Your friendships keep getting you work. People that like working with you will keep coming back. Dwight Little, the director I've known for twenty years, I got Tekken because of him. We had come up with an idea called Future Perfect before that. He was offered Tekken and took the idea of Future Perfect and used it as a template. They flew me out for this meeting with the head of the company. We went out to dinner at Trader Vics. He said, 'don't say anything I got this. I didn't even know what story he was pitching. He would say, 'Alan and I have talked about this.' Dwight didn't know what the story was.*

## **Marc Jaffe (Comedy Writer and Philanthropist): Less Pressure Because My Wife Works A Steady Job; Everyone Is A Freelancer Now – They Just Don't Know It**

Marc ironically captures the reality of freelance, "Because of the nature of the business, you're a freelancer always – even when you have a job – it's a temporary job. Even if you get a job on a TV show, a Seinfeld is rare that it lasts for so many years. So many shows last a year or a couple of episodes and then they're yanked. It's not even whether it's a good show or not. Everything is a part-time job – it's your full focus for awhile." He is fortunate to have a wife make the larger, steadier income and notes that it is a privileged position, "to have the ability to say no to something and arrange your schedule the way you want. My wife's been great. She appreciates the work and likes that I can be there when she can't be."

## You May Not Be Rich, But You'll Have A Rich Life

The freelancers involved in this project eschew the “high risk, high reward” philosophy. They are talented, creative professionals who innately understand the energy, commitment and intricacies it takes to do a project well, within budget and on time. When discussing rewards, they embrace flexibility, choice, collaborating with others and working on projects that matter or inspire. They’ll also settle for work at a fair rate with decent collaborators and clients. The narrative of “high risk, high reward” is now being supplanted by a more realistic motif, which recognizes that Labor Day is everyday and this reflects “hard work and fair pay” – with maybe a little time for renewal, playing, and dreaming. The reward is a rich life embodying moments of “doing” and “being.”

## Changing Work Narratives For Changing Times

### A Creative Job Brings Life To Your Work

The narratives of these “migrant creatives” – comedy writers, audio engineers, videographers, producers, experimental filmmakers, screenwriters, journalists, web designers, documentarians, etc. – are stories about initially following a creative passion without much thought beforehand about the risk or reward. It was something the project participants felt compelled to do. The choice of freelance was merely a vehicle for their talents. Whether the work is freelance, full-time or part-time – these migrant creatives have wonderful adaptive skills that allow them to pursue their passions, extract the best of a situation, and still make a living regardless of the work style.

Their journey started with following their creative joy, the pursuit for those rare moments of flow, where the world and your place in it feels right, inspired – and this moment cannot be monetarily defined. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, describes the experiential space that creative individuals inhabit when completely engaged and in a moment of surrender and intensity of focus on a project, idea, or activity. Athletes, artists, and scientists recognize these creative experiential moments of oneness as being in “the zone.” The participants involved with this project thrive on the creative stimulation of tackling a variety of projects and this allows them to have more peak moments where they come alive with the challenge of improvisation.

### The New Deal Is About Bringing Work To Your Life

The creative potential achieved through fulfilling work described earlier seems a bit elusive as media freelancers are just now trying to make a living. Fast-forward to the 1990s, where stock options catapulted techno-geeks to millionaire superstar status overnight, and “rag to riches” narratives escalated expectations for many creative individuals working in technology and this attitude spilled over into media. Gina Neff posits an interesting view that many in the dot-com era embraced risk because it provided the appearance of choice -- and “the idea of taking chances” became the predominant economic rhetoric that allowed people to weather the fear of uncertainty in the new economy (Neff, 2007 p. 33).



The turbulent economy for the 2000s, bookended by the dot-com crash and the global recession, is where the shift occurred for many workers in the United States as they saw jobs eliminated along with decreased wages and exacerbated deadlines. The new reality of “at least I have a job” clearly trumped the seemingly indulgent voices saying, “I want a fulfilling job.” The stories from the work front suggested a “doomsday prepper” attitude and this drove a deeper wedge between corporate and creative. A new worker cynicism has emerged with people realizing that risk is only rewarded on a corporate management level or on Wall Street – and that people on Main Street are in trouble. Daniel Jacoby observes, “U.S. workers will either have to tolerate this new situation or demand and design a new “new deal” (Jacoby, 2009, p. 650).

### **There Is A New Work Consciousness Emerging: A Few Bold Companies Provide A Model for Synergistic Cooperation**

The workforce of the future is not just about monetary concerns but giving people the flexibility to renew, create, and dream together. Although we have heard multiple stories from these participants of unrealistic deadlines along with diminished wages -- there is a glimmer of hope on the horizon with the emergence of new companies with a conscience. Companies like Zappos.com, Google, SAS Institute, and Dream Works Animation are consistently on *Fortune's* magazine list for the top 100 places to work. View the 2012 profiled winners (<http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/best-companies/>).

These companies possess many of the attributes of a great place to work as described by Tony Schwartz, the president of CEO of the Energy Project, in a recent article he wrote for *Fast Company*. Schwartz suggests, “The answer is that great employers must shift the focus from trying to get more out of people, to investing more in them by addressing their core needs – physical, emotional, mental and spiritual” (<http://www.fastcompany.com/1781221/the-twelve-attributes-of-a-truly-great-place-to-work>). A few critical attributes for what makes a good employer and employee situation: a commitment to paying a living wage; a shared stake in the company's success; a culture of mutual respect and care; and providing employees with incentives and opportunities for growth.

We are living in world where there is an emerging dynamic of an employer and employee performance that celebrates how we can create meaning together. This win-win scenario not only makes for a better workplace but also improves production. A synergistic performance that demands the best of our capabilities and invites shared possibilities. “As we engage with each other, we not only create a sense of ‘who’ we are but also a sense of ‘what’ is valued. We create – we perform ‘together’ – a world wherein a lived reality can emerge” (Anderson & Gehart, 2007, p. 334).

### **The New Workplace Embraces Appreciation and Interdependence**

Steven Tatar is involved with a company, *The Open Office* that is taking a closed elementary school and reconvertng to a shared workspace in Cleveland. Here he is repurposing old industrial castaway parts and designing a functional and fashionable space for co-working. The transition from coffee shops to a shared office setting will provide a

laboratory for shared resources, collaboration, and entrepreneurial development. This is the evolution of freelance -- a creative clubhouse, cooperative or collective coming to a neighborhood near you. *Deskmag* magazine focuses exclusively on the growth and popularity of co-working spaces (<http://www.deskmag.com/en/how-profitable-are-coworking-spaces-177>). When designing inviting work scenarios, Appreciative Inquiry is a philosophy that is at the forefront of change because it recognizes that enterprise is an interdependent performance. "By asking 'who's affected? Who has a stake in this?' we begin to recognize that no change happens in isolation" (Cooperrider, D. & D. Whitney, 1999, p. 4).

## **Takeaway: The Creativity Of Living A Good Life Is The "Real Job"**

A capricious economy has clearly had an impact on the storyline for many of these participants but it is clearly a more subverted micro narrative when you consider the dominant macro narrative of a successful career working on nationally recognized projects over a period ranging from 10 – 30 years. This glimpse is merely a snapshot of these folks interviewed during a time when the economy was in turmoil. Although there is adversity, it has not curtailed their success and they continue to remain inventive.

What keeps them going? They possess a sense of knowing that they've been through this before as Bill says, "*My instinct said the same thing that happened in the 80s is happening again . . . The over-the-horizon radar thing is part of the instinctual mechanism that a freelancer must have.*"

All the freelancers involved with this project approach adversity with courage and continue to produce impressive projects and entrepreneurial ventures. They have the track record and experience to know they'll land safely or adapt to the circumstances; and that may mean starting a new business, project, retraining or taking some time out to entertain other life narratives. Peggy Holman writes about being receptive to the unknown in *Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval Into Opportunity*.

What does it take to be receptive to the unknown? Perhaps knowing that turmoil is a gateway to creativity and innovation provides a reason to be open to the unfamiliar. Just as seeds root in rich dark soil, so does emergent change require the darkness of the unknown. After all, if we know the outcome and how to create it, then by definition nothing unexpected can emerge. Even knowing its value, embracing mystery, being receptive to not knowing, takes courage. (Holman, 2010 pp. 58-59)

The new narrative emerging from these migrant creative participants is the realization that the "high risk, high reward" paydays that buoyed the optimism of creative workers throughout the 1990s – twenty years later – is now replaced with a scenario that is more sobering and modest. All these project participants ventured into freelance because it is where they found the creative work and this gives them a sense of purpose. As Steven Tatar observes:

*I'm a freelancer because I got laid-off at the end of a huge burst of an economy. I never really found a job that I was willing to do. I can get a job -- but I don't want to get one that isn't aligned with my strengths, my interests, my passions, my intent and vision for my professional life. That vision is everybody's dream at least creatives.*

The goal for all these participants was not to be the best worker bee on the planet. Ironically, they all became very adept after years of practice of developing the skill sets that Rosalind Gill mentioned as critical in the new economy – management of self. These project participants are entrepreneurial, hard working and resourceful. However, I have never heard one person in this group mention getting rich as a goal. It was always about being able to pursue their creative projects and hopefully have a chance to intersect with some intelligent beings along the way. Although they became excellent at “doing” – they were really “being” the best version of themselves no matter what work configuration they inhabited. All these “migrant creatives” are a work in progress and exemplify the spirit of creativity and ingenuity needed to move forward together in the future. Steven describes the importance of the shared interdependence community when it comes to creativity and observes, *“It's about the creative process – the noise in your head – not between you and yourself – but amongst people who resonate with me is the single most important element.”*

The challenge for all of us is not to only be creative – but also to live a creative life regardless of circumstances. However, a more compelling narrative is to share a creative life with others – and perhaps that is the most “real job” that any of us will have in our lifetime.

Creativity is not enough when it comes to freelance. One must also have the ability to negotiate with the client throughout the entire process. The winners are no longer the slick bottom-line, outcome-driven persuasive talkers – but are listeners as explored in the following chapter – *“A Conversation About Negotiation, Reputation, and Sustainability.”*

## VII. A Conversation About Negotiation, Reputation and Sustainability

***“Everybody’s only looking out for themselves. Except us freelancers – we’re always looking out for each other – at least in my group of people. Years ago companies treated you with respect – more like family. Today you could have been at the company for 30-years and they’ll walk in your office and say you’re fired – tell you to leave immediately – and they escort you out. In the old days, they’d give you an office for a month. They sure don’t do that now. I decided that I’d never be loyal to a company again. I’ll be loyal to the people within it – wherever they go.”***

***Sheryl White, Copywriter***

# A Conversation About Negotiation, Reputation, and Sustainability

These *migrant creatives*, with 15 – 30+ years of experience working on media projects, have entered many types of work configurations and perform at a high level. At this point, with impressive portfolios and accolades, they have clients or commissions coming to them because of proven track record of producing quality media work that matters along with a reputation for dependability and creativity – but ultimately they still must negotiate a deal. I introduce the notion of *negotiation as an ongoing conversation*. Negotiation is a continuous process that is constituted in conversation. There are seven critical elements examined in the section *The Conversation Drives the Freelance Negotiation*: interest, conversational trinity (hearing, listening, and speaking), discovery, mutual coordination, appreciative capacity, educating the client, deciphering the unspoken rate card, and renegotiation. Reputation, the ability to keep your word, is intrinsically linked with negotiation because the meeting would never take place if there were any questions about the freelancer's capacity to listen, deliver, or collaborate.

The second part of the chapter invites the participants' take on whether their freelance is sustainable in a section entitled, "*Sustainability On The Edge: Would Trade Freedom For Dental.*" Although sustainability is often viewed in relation to finances, this chapter explores the quality of life issues as it relates to the ecology of a healthy work/life/rest balance. This balance has been essential for the freelancer since it is a profession that requires a tremendous amount of creative energy. The rest of the workforce population is now becoming more conscious of energy and balance in the workforce. Progressive, high profile companies are now embracing a more appreciative approach when it comes to creating a healthier environment and courting inventive talent. The definition most in sync with my viewpoint about sustainability comes from a MIT Sloan Management Review:

What does sustainability mean? Depends whom you ask. (Debates about it can get warm.) But at root it's the idea that systems – including natural and human ones – need to be regenerative and balanced in order to last. We believe that that means all kinds of systems: economic, environmental, societal, and personal. The sustainability questions is: How can we design and build a world in which the Earth thrives and people can pursue flourishing lives? (<http://sloanreview.mit.edu/what-is-sustainability/>)

The takeaway for sustainability, at the end of this chapter, reveals a new workforce with expanded employment configurations that allows people to imagine new work style possibilities – and this includes freelancers. As more people migrate to freelance work, the

media freelancers are again leading the pack and reinventing their career. Although we bemoan the recession, it has created an improvisational awareness that career is not about stagnant either/or work style options but is now more expansive, inventive, and versatile.

## The Conversation Drives The Freelance Negotiation

### Interest Ignites The Passion

Negotiation is not about smooth talking, formulaic negotiations for it is a shared performance that requires both parties – the client and freelancer – to have an engaged conversation about the expectations including timelines, mission, deadlines, roles, responsibilities, wages, changes/revisions and the parameters of whether they can color inside or outside the lines. For the freelancers, the decision is based on many critical factors but an important element is whether they find the project interesting as articulated by executive television producer Kate Farrell:

*There's geography, there's relationship, there's money and there's interest. When you freelance you actually have a choice about what you will work on. Sure, you worry about money but if the subject really doesn't interest you, you don't have to take the job. If you're lucky enough to have some money in the bank, you ask, "What am I passionate about? What do I want to do a show about?" Somebody might call me and say I want you to do a video on my theater company. No, no thanks not interested. So interest is a factor.*

When interest or curiosity is invited into the dialogic process, the dynamic changes from an obligatory money making venture to a participatory collaborative performance where the client and contractor can create together. Yet, interest requires an active investigation of what is possible and this involves exploration through dialogue. Whether Kasumi is working on creating an experimental video or Kate is working on a reality show – these are projects that intensely engage their full attention and open up a door to a not only a new area of interest but also revives or initiates client, contractor, collaborator or commission engagement.

The freelancer clearly recognizes that although their path is not predictable, the tradeoff of inviting in creative possibility is an enticing and generative reward to those with inquisitive minds. For example, Steven Tatar helped to organize *The Retain LeBron James campaign* in Cleveland. These are the kind of projects that creative folks relish and allow them to playfully intersect with other creative minds to promote larger community involvement. If you're passionate about a project, there are times to give away your work for free or a reduced rate in order to intersect with some vibrant individuals or develop something interesting for your portfolio. As Steven Tatar notes, "*we don't get to do interesting, wide open creative work enough*" and he enjoyed the teamwork. Tatar and his creative team diverged from the traditional courtship tactics:

*And one of the things we can demonstrate that to the world is our clarity and our confidence about who we are as a set of neighbors and neighborhoods – and we aren't dependent on a superstar to anoint us to feel good. That's why New York,*

*Miami, and everybody was like, 'let's impress the hell out of him. Come here and we're going to treat you like an emperor.' We backed off of 'he's the king' attitude and said what can we do? We can't compete with New York about how cool we are. The only thing that we have that nobody has is that we're his home. We're his peeps. This is where he's from. This is truly his neighborhood. He can go out to dinner in Akron with his wife and kids to the local restaurant and have hamburgers. Nobody's going to be giving him the celebrity treatment because we respect him as a neighbor. Nobody else could do it. And that is what we uniquely honed in on and that was the basis of our campaign.*

What Steven and his creative cohorts created was a socially constructed, appreciative campaign that involved celebrating the power of being neighbors and community. They created a sense of community by creating conversations about being neighbors. Even though LeBron picked the Miami Heat for his team, the campaign engaged community spirit and spoke to the power of our connectedness. His acceptance of this project, initially without remuneration, was not only for the creative challenge but because it brought to life the full use of his large relational network. That is the kind of generative energy that creative individuals thrive on and is a part of what makes the freelance experience sustainable.

### **The Conversational Trinity: “Listening, Hearing, and Speaking”**

The client wants to hire an individual who can communicate their culture or idea and this requires an in-depth understanding of what the client is seeking and sometimes it is not clear. The client begins to tell their story and then it is freelancer's turn to respond and get clarification. At times, the freelancer almost takes on the role of a therapist who asks the client pointed questions about what they hope to achieve and what they would like to see happen with the project in question. Whether it is a video, documentary, audio recording, article, website, or radio show -- this shared performance requires soulful, skillful “listening, hearing and speaking” for all parties to examine what is possible (Anderson, 2007, p.35). Listening is a participatory activity that requires “asking questions to learn more about what is said and not what you think should be said” (Anderson, 2007, p. 36).

The ability to hear the other demands deep listening and this requires not mentally reloading to come up with a clever response but to really attend to the story and let it steep. As therapist, coach and consultant Harlene Anderson suggests, the storytelling process requires the listener to be “actively involved, hearing and speaking as well” (Anderson, 2007, p. 37). As related to therapy, the freelancer must relay what they heard the client say to make sure their interpretation is clear. This is a relational process of interpreting the conversation of the other. The freelance perspective of the outsider looking in is what allows an enterprise or company to see themselves in a new or an appreciative light; when this happens, there is a shared performance, where the freelancer and client have the potential to create something new together.

### **The Discovery is Part of The Negotiation**

The initial conversation, even if the freelancer and client have worked together on previous projects, is the part of the discovery phase where they must explore the contours of the

project before time and money can be discussed. The best freelancers intuitively adopt many of the positive principles of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), “based in asking possibility-oriented questions that focus on what is working and what is possible to inspire collaborative and wise action” (Holman, 2010, p. 202). The AI process intensely focuses on the role of relationship in creating new realities and there is an awareness that also encompasses of the power of language to “create our sense of reality – our sense of the true, the good, and the possible” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 50)

Steven Tatar, an entrepreneur, describes taking the opportunity presented and allowing the “what if” possibilities to change the original dynamics and catapult him into creating a new enterprise:

*What Ohio Knitting Mills has come to represent is a wonderful happenstance is that when I met Gary and found out that he had a huge collection of sweaters from the 40s that he didn't know what to do with and maybe I had some ideas. He hired me to do some consulting and marketing for him. To him the problem meant selling things. I came back to him and said my advice to him – again this is an example of creating opportunity. I said, here's how I would solve your problem. I would create opportunity. I think you're sitting on a gold mine. The raw DNA of a fabulous, unbelievable, potentially monster of an apparel brand – call it Ohio Knitting Mills. He said, 'huh?' He said, 'I've been doing it for 41 years – if you think it's so great why don't you do it?'*

*The way I looked at it and described the opportunity was a vast archive of really cool, quirky knit pieces as the basis for articulating the brand for telling the story. The story of Ohio Knitting Mills is the authentic story of heartland manufacturing in a community of makers in the industrial era and the craftsmanship of that era to make goods that reflect postwar American popular culture. It's cool. It's about colors, patterns, and playfulness. It's so rare to have something to find something like this that has a whole language. It's like discovering the Lost City of Atlantis. But he trusted me, 'He said I don't get it – but I get you and I'll support you in doing it.' The way we structured the deal was that I had control of the materials and the message. I have to build and create the brand. I have to know that I'm not competing with you and anyone else. We wrote an option agreement that gives me the exclusive rights to buy and sell all of the Ohio Knitting Mills garments for a certain period of time. We established a price structure. I pay for every piece that I sell. If it's a one, two three of a kind I pay x-dollars. If it's a piece in quantities in four or more I pay another price. Then I just went for it. I raised privately \$100,000 from four individuals. Again it was 2005 and 2006, a few people said I'll throw \$50,000 your way and see what happens. They're still friends. I had drinks with a few of these people last night and they said to keep going.*

In the discovery phase of finding out what their client needs, the discussion shifts to what is possible, and then the dialogue moves to how can we move forward together. Steven and the client explored new possibilities that had not been considered. Gary, the original Ohio Knitting Mills owner, was satisfied because he no longer was interested in continuing the business and his original intent was to receive payment for his leftover merchandise after closing up shop. In the new deal presented, Steven was able to brand a lucrative venture knowing he had the rights to the materials for a certain period of time. It turned out to be a



win-win situation for both parties.

The relationship shifts after the work is delivered or the position is complete because then the performance or product is evaluated in terms of value. If the situation has been a mutually agreeable scenario, then the opportunity to work together again will most likely happen again. In Steven's case, he produced a book *Ohio Knitting Mills Knitting Book: 26 Patterns Celebrating Four Decades of American Sweater Style* (<http://www.ohioknittingmills.com/collections/the-ohio-knitting-mills-knitting-book>), which historically chronicled Ohio Knitting Mills and this allowed Gary to reconnect to his family legacy. For Steven, this book serves as a fund-raising promotional tool to take the company into the production phase. Gary was tired of manufacturing the clothing and merely wanted to get paid for merchandise and move on. Steven recognizes the vast potential of 1940s -1970s clothing, rebranded the line, and is poised to produce the merchandise. This restructuring, a negotiation, turned out to be more creative than the original intention for both parties through a mutual process of discovery and coordination.

### **Mutual Coordination is Critical To Negotiating A Successful Freelance Experience**

All companies have different communication styles that require different levels of contact, approvals, and assurances that you are progressing toward your anticipated deadline. The potential clients should be treated individually given the variance with creative approaches; some managers want to approve all the steps moving forward while others just wait for you to deliver the finished contracted assignment. There are many clients who do not want to hear from the freelancer unless a problem arises and others who want frequent updates on your progress.

As part of the conversation, it is essential for the freelancer to understand the level of interaction the client desires and the channels the client must go through to approve or shape the work in progress. These various levels of client engagement can add time to the decision-making and also increase revisions depending on the number of stakeholders involved. It is important for the freelancer to take a "not knowing" stance so they will not make assumptions even if it is the same client because management does change. This kind of transparency allows for clearly defined negotiations and a fluid work relationship rather than second-guessing the clients' needs. This is not merely communicating but also mutually coordinating their actions to allow for meetings, discussions, planning and other activities that allow for the production of a creative product. Mutual coordination is a participatory construct that "is not a matter of simply 'decoding' the meaning of others' actions. Rather, it is a matter of coordinating actions with them" (Gergen, Schrader & Gergen, 2009, p. 247) as illustrated, in the example above, by Steven and Gary in Ohio Knitting Mills project.

In a short-lived work relationship, individuals do not have a lot of time to discover what works best in terms of having a fully engaged participatory experience especially if the work is done at a distance. When the freelancer is invited in to the culture, they enter as a visitor with the potential to be invited back again. This requires more than just experience and delivering the creative goods; the freelancer must have an antenna to quickly assess the situation along with highly attuned relational feelers to flexibly respond as Carol, a

videographer, describes:

*It's learning to feel your clients out. This is a perfect example. I have a very large client who shall remain nameless. All these other people who are on the job say she's the 'dragon lady' awful – such a bitch. She's a brand marketing person. They are notoriously persnickety because guess what – that's their job to protect the brand. They're strategists and the brand police will come smack you if you do something outside the guidelines. Well, I figured that out in no time at all that this woman wanted was for people to not pull shit over on her. She wanted to be in the information loop and know what was going on. At five o'clock every day, I would send her a little email letting her know what went on for the day.*

Carol figured out what the client needed and it was to be informed so she could do her job. This is the “mutual coordination” required in any successful relationship. It is not being a pleaser but truly understanding her role in providing a creative service as Carol notes, “A lot of time creative directors don't want people to know too much because they don't want them to change their idea. My attitude is that it's their video – not my video.” There is a suspension of judgment concerning right or wrong actions and more about coordinating with what the client needs.

Bill Cavanaugh, an audio engineer, is quick to point out that sometimes mutual coordination can be as simple as making sure you are speaking the same language:

*Let's say I'm hired to do a job for a commercial for Tampons. This actually happened to me. The producer will say to me that a particular chord doesn't sound very 'Tampon-like' to him. What the hell does that mean? I said, 'are you looking for something that goes (BILL MAKES POPPING NOISE). What are you saying?*

*. . . I literally had a job in the 1980s for the launch of an early Internet provider. In any event, this woman said we want to introduce this service because it's somewhat classical – even though it's high tech. We're really looking for a solo piano kind of thing. I said okay – what do you mean by a little more classical? I played something and say something like this. 'Beethoven-like which is a little more Romantic or Mozart-like? I kept working my way through Hayden and then Bach – and she said that's it. That's Baroque but to her it's classical because that's what it said in the record store. . . She didn't have the language. I said okay and I did this demo spot. She said, 'I'll fall on my sword for that – it's beautiful.' . . .*

*. . . I'm not the pianist – so I come into the session with a real pianist. She comes in that day with the account executive and the client. The client says, 'what's this? I thought it was supposed to be jazz?' I said jazz? The account executive gets upset. The producer and the account executive go out of the room and they come back in. She says, I guess I wasn't really clear that I wanted classical jazz. So they merged their words classical and jazz. Oh, are you talking Ellington? Nobody knew what they were talking about. This is what ended happening. I started playing some chords and they're like NO, NO. It had to be solo piano playing. It turned out what they were looking for was George Winston new age piano. The account guy was hearing that as jazz. The client was hearing that as jazz. And the producer was hearing it as classical. When it's actually new age fluff played on the white keys. The*

*pianist goes home. I can handle this it's just the white keys. I sat and just blew something out.*

Both Carol and Bill recognize that their job depends on being able to articulate what the client is thinking and this is a mutually coordinated action. The definition of “mutuality can simply mean that all participants are committed and able to make some contribution to the process” (Gergen, Schrader & Gergen, 2009, p. 102). This process is exhibited as Bill describes the give and take performance with the client to finally get to what music they wanted:

*It's not about me. It's about them. Going over it again and again. Even if I'm failing, I have to try a 100 times to give them what they want – and that's how you win them. And then you can educate them. Sometimes they really don't know. I had to sit down on the keyboard to find what they wanted. I had gone from the Baroque period in the 1700s to Duke Ellington in the 1920s – back to Mozart. Then I got to the 1980s George Winston. And then I finally got it.*

### **Educating The Client About Process Enhances The Experience**

The successful freelancers are really careful about “educating” the clients on what is needed or the time it takes and this is definitely part of the negotiation. Clients are able to pay more for a service or product if they understand why it is critical suggests Carol Beck:

*“You’ve got to educate them to the process and that requires a whole lot of patience getting their attention. Explaining to them why you can’t cut these two crew members off the list in an effort to pinch pennies. You have to explain why they are critical to the production. You have to feel for their position. They’re usually running scared from their bosses.”*

This ability to feel for a co-worker or a clients’ position and then taking the time to explain is essential for any solid working relationship regardless of whether it is freelance or not. The irony is that freelancers are often kinder to short-term coworkers than long-term employees who take their work relationships for granted. This disregard is reminiscent of the dating experience where people are often on their best behavior, once married there is an inclination to lapse into moments where they are sometimes less than considerate of their partner.

### **Appreciative Capacity Delivers More Than Just Relationship Building**

The freelancer, as an outsider, is literally dancing multiple steps as performer, collaborator and sometimes educator. Bill, although given unclear directions about whether the type of music the client desired was classical or jazz, he never gave up until he found the right sound for what the client was trying to appropriate. This required him to educate the client on musical style options. In the AI Practitioner, Shweta Bisen, referring to the work of Thatchenkery and Metzker (2006), defines the appreciative capacity of individuals as having “an ability to endow everyday activity with a sense of purpose. They can re-frame, they are flexible and they are actively and spontaneously adaptive” (Bisen, 2011). This appreciative capacity brings a sense of depth to the relationship where the employer recognizes that the work will be of a high quality, and most importantly possesses high level thinking to

challenge the status quo of an organization or to offer an alternative viewpoint with the capacity to excite and change.

In a Harvard Business Review article, *Selling Is Not About Relationships*, the authors identify challengers, who are individuals imbued with an appreciative capacity; “who win by pushing customers to think differently, using insight to create constructive tension in the sale” and these individuals dramatically outperform all categories including problem solvers, relationship builders, lone wolves, and hard workers (Dixon & Adamson, 2011). The challengers, endowed with an appreciative capacity, are seen as dominating sales because they teach their customers how to save or make money -- or in Bill’s case understand music or in Carol’s becoming more familiar with production. In addition, “They are comfortable with tension and are unlikely to acquiesce to every customer demand. When necessary, they can press customers a bit – not just in terms of their thinking but around things like price” (Dixon & Adamson, 2011).

The traditional view of negotiation, as a form of persuasive argument, is more dynamic and satisfying when we shift to a dialogic approach where we recognize the need of the other to make meaning (McNamee, 2004, p. 272). Even after the freelancer has negotiated the contract, the ability to be involved in relationship with the client often requires prescriptive conversations to make sure everyone is on the same page. Carol Beck tells the story of dealing with a complicated micromanager where they shared a transformative moment:

*It involves someone who is a completely neurotic micromanager and fails to see how his decisions are creating chaos on the set. Somehow it’s my fault. The thing about this guy is that he’s not a bad person. Outside the work place, he’s a funny nice guy that I could have a beer with. His methodologies are really messed up. If I let myself get upset, I would be in a perpetual state of disarray. My attitude is that I listened to all his criticism and said, ‘I want to make this better for you.’ Then he was kind of stymied when I asked him to delineate what wasn’t working for him. In an open friendly way, I said, ‘if you can help me understand what I’m not doing then – I’ll try my best to do that.’ Then he finally admitted that maybe it was just me (LAUGHS). Personal growth moment.*

There is no doubt that listening, but more importantly being heard, is primary to any negotiated or transformative experience. Linda Putnam, a communications expert, describes the transformative moment in the conflict process as one which offers new understandings or interpretations of events and states: “New interpretations of relationships might stem from enhanced learning, connecting to each other in different ways, and building different types of interdependencies” (Putnam, 2004, p. 276). Carol demonstrates that by asking this manager to “*delineate what wasn’t working for him*” she was able to move from general to specific and this prompted the conversation to change. Putnam suggests that “shifts in the level of abstraction,” allow for critical moments to occur (Putnam, 2004, p. 278).

A more appreciative approach would be to change the conversational dynamic from thinking of the client as an opponent to a partner and figuring out how to move forward together. Appreciative Inquiry, a methodological approach that engages what is working in business as opposed to a problem discourse, improves the capacity for accomplishing a goal and best utilizing resources. Carol, in that short exchange, moved the “problem talk”

to “possibility talk” and this moves the conversational dynamic from adversarial to one that is more livable (Whitney, Cooperrider, Trosten-Bloom & Kaplin, 2005, p. 2) A simple reframing of “what can I do to improve this situation?” allows for a more generative discussion. “Appreciative managers bring an air of connectivity, gratitude, positivity and empathy, which itself reduces conflict among people” (Bisen, 2011, p. 73).

### **The Contract Equalizer: The Renegotiation Option**

Steven Tatar brings a secondary tier of expertise to the negotiating process and that is to have a clear understanding of when either party, freelancer or contractor, has exceeded or changed the original agreement and then renegotiation is in order:

*I'm not efficient on time but I don't stop until I know it's good. Sometimes I spend way more time than I should, and not because you keep changing your mind or can't give me information. I try to figure out what I believe the project should take for an appropriate level of efficiency. I think this a project I should realistically be able to accomplish in ten hours. I know where to pad and also know I have enough experience to manage the process so it doesn't turn into a runaway train. I also tell my clients how I approach this, 'I'd like us to recognize or agree that there's a point in the process or engagement when we're getting beyond what I agreed to do. I would like to do this for you and I think it's valuable – but we're exceeding the scope of my work or bid. If you want me to do that – we have to discuss what's appropriate.' That's just me. I want an agreement so I know what I'm being paid for and not just running the meter at the client's expense.*

This small caveat of a negotiation exemption, articulated in advance, allows the freelancer and client to revisit the negotiation if the contours of the job change. This is a contract equalizer that allows both the freelancer to make agreement alterations and still keep their word.

### **The Unspoken Rate Card: Understanding The Market And Your Value**

The following freelancers talk about some of their negotiations. Since fees are so rarely discussed in books, I found the participants' candidness about money refreshing. It is the freelancers' job to know in advance what is the standard price in the industry so they have an idea of how much to charge. As Kate mentions, there is an unspoken rate card:

*I think there is an unspoken rate card. No one really publishes rates for job. You have to know what they are or call someone who knows. A friend of mine works on 'Big Brother.' That is a huge production. They sign contracts. They put money into a retirement. They might even get health benefits. The show I just came off of – we hired one postproduction supervisor who was in charge of deliverables – keeping the editors on schedule. When we interviewed, one candidate was happy with \$1,500/week, the other \$1,800/week. The had different experience but the rate fluctuated that much based on what both candidates knew about what the job paid (and of course their personal experience). We hired the candidate at the lower rate because she was the right fit but later I told her, 'you should have asked for more money because I wanted you and we would have had to pay you more money. But you came in low.' There really is an unspoken rate card.*

Bill Cavanaugh, an audio engineer, is also quick to point out that the rate card is sanctimonious and the real power is in the deal making:

*I think that in the past twenty years the rate cards that were published by studios were just to make the client feel like they were getting a deal when the rates were \$700 and they were paying \$500 per hour. . . Then the cat got out of the bag and everyone realized it was whatever deal you could make. They found out someone else was paying \$300 instead of the \$700. Companies publish a rate card but they still make a deal.*

It is important to ask other freelancers what the going rate is in the business but also ask what is appropriate for your level of expertise. All rates are not created equal and it is contingent on a portfolio track record along and inevitably word-of-mouth travels fast in the industry regarding dependability, workability, and creativity. Bill is clear about how he determines his rate by asking the following questions:

*I always ask for two things. I want to see the job first. I want to see the quality of the audio and the condition it's in. Then I ask a second question, which is technical – what do I have to deliver? Is it a stereo mix minus the narrator or is the narrator mix dipped or undipped meaning the level is going up or down. Am I just delivering a music and effects track? I ask them the technical specifications for all the levels. Then I look in my mind to see how long the job is going to take me 10 hours and I want 225 an hour. So I say to them the whole thing will be a flat number and my price is going to be 2250. Sometimes it takes me twelve and sometimes it takes me eight hours. It usually works out in the aggregate or average around \$225 an hour on my system.*

All the participants have a bottom line idea in their head about what is acceptable or not. As Kate Farrell, an executive producer, comments:

*I find that my work comes from people I've worked with before who understand what I do and who have respect for me and I have respect for them. The other factor in taking a job is how much does it pay. I'm really not going to take a job that pays less than a day rate that I'm comfortable with.*

Kate is very clear about what is her comfort zone and says:

*You can get anywhere from \$700 - \$1,500 a day depending on the show and what the budget is. I wouldn't work for less than that really, I would rather work at Home Depot than work for \$300 a day – because I put everything – my 25+ years of experience into the job. So I want to be paid.*

The conversation with Kate continues about negotiations, “You can't always get them to give you a number first. It's a big game. Especially when you're dealing with your friends because now your friends are hiring you” and adds:

*Being a freelancer for so many years, I always had a number in my head and then I always added more to it, in case I had to speak first. I always said the number, which was at least a couple hundred dollars, more than I really wanted. I've been fortunate*

*that most time, I'm not desperate for work.*

Kate is in an enviable position because she worked nonstop on network sports for ten years and has significant savings. There is no doubt that having a cushion allows her to negotiate from a position of feeling confident about asking for what she's worth:

*Also I know if I take a job for less than I want monetarily – I'll be resentful. Maybe I've lost some jobs along the way by asking for a certain amount of money and not budging on it – but I know that as someone who hires people – I always want to give them what they think they're worth.*

Because the job requires working intensely with people for periods of time, Kate has the ability to read people and could tell in advance that she would not be working for this person.

*I went in to interview with somebody for a staff job once. We sat down in his office and he was all backlit. I couldn't see him. He was in silhouette. I said could you close the blinds because you are all backlit? I can't see your face. I don't think that went over so well. But in that instant, I decided to be totally who I was.*

Kate has worked as an executive producer on projects ranging from the *Olympics* to *Raising Sextuplets*. She talks about how freelancers shift to fit an employer, assignment, work culture or a new collaborative partner:

*You have to read who's hiring you before going in to talk to them. You do your research on them, check out their credits, their career path. And then, of course, I will know what my subject is and adapt. I'll have a different attitude for a show that is about six babies than a world championship or figure skating. I'm sure this is true in all professions; you have to know who's going to employ you. As a freelancer, you have to adapt and learn what is ahead of you or else you won't make a great first impression.*

The adaptation required for all freelancers to understand the culture you are entering. It does not mean you switch your identity but it is akin to respecting cultural nuances before entering a country as a visitor. Therapist, coach, and consultant Harlene Anderson uses the host-guest metaphor to suggest that fostering a partnership requires “meeting and greeting a client in a manner that communicates they are welcomed and respected” (Anderson & Gehart, 2007, p. 45). The freelancer, an invited guest, must be respectful of their host and use it as an opportunity to learn from them and then must be performatively flexible to switch roles and serve as educator, adviser or collaborator.

## **Freelance Requires An Appreciative Stance, Ongoing Dialogue**

The discussion is not just about talking to clients about what the job entails or negotiating a price. It is also about embracing an appreciative stance of engagement that bypasses a “what's in it for me” attitude or merely acquiescing and giving the client exactly “what they

want.” Instead, this ongoing conversation is about “how do move forward together” and is built around dialogue that engages potential and possibility.

Appreciative conversations can be as simple as: How do you see this project expanding your market share, leadership or visibility? Tell us about a pivotal leadership moment at your company that made you appreciate working there. What is the advantage of this product or project when it comes to expanding your visibility? These questions seek to explore and engage quality moments, strategic advantages, and shared visions are merely examples of positive questions that move the conversation forward to create something new. The *Encyclopedia of Positive Questions: Using Appreciative Inquiry to Bring Out the Best in Your Organization* is an excellent resource for reframing interviews (Whitney, Cooperrider, Trosten-Bloom & Kaplin, 2005).

These inspired moments change the dynamic from the freelancer “working for” to “working with” the client and that is an important distinction that fosters the relational connection that promotes improvisation within an organization. Once the client and freelancer decide to move forward, then the freelancer and client must mutually coordinate their work, meetings, planning, and preparation with a clear-cut understanding of the most efficient way to connect and determine if they are on course.

The freelancers with an edge are those who present another way of mining opportunity or examining change from a more enlightened vantage point. As challengers, they push their client to envision their situation or product with an appreciative capacity that is built on mutual respect. It is not “yes” people that are valued but those who value the relational and creative process that encourages ongoing and mutual exchange. Although the stereotype of the “shark” exists in business, the relationally skilled improvisers and those examining ways to make work a win-win situation for all are quietly leading the way by example in this new economy.

## **Reputation Is Critical: The Importance Of Keeping Your Word**

Your character and perceived reputation is critical with all freelance work. The truth is that even in the best situations a formal contract or purchase order is often not initiated. Emails are often utilized to follow-up or discuss the work and the subsequent agreed upon rates. The magic formula for any freelancer is remaining true to the articulated parameters of the project. As Steven Tatar mentioned earlier, if there are changes in the scope of any agreement – they need to be conveyed to the client along the way.

Sheryl White, a copywriter for major national clients, discusses the importance of “keeping your word” as intrinsic to maintaining the client’s loyalty and trust in you to deliver what was promised. The freelancers’ ability to keep their word is almost a throwback to a time when verbal contracts were acknowledged with a handshake. Sheryl, when asked if she still had trust of people in the advertising business notes, “*Only a few, everybody’s only looking out for themselves. Except us freelancers – we’re always looking out for each other. At least in my group of people. We really look out for each other.*” This is a business where you know



who your friends are and they help to promote your work because they have confidence in not only your competence – but in your ability to keep your word.

Talent is only a small part of the success quotient for any freelancer. There must be equal values of loyalty, trust, and respect to not only make sure they are capable of completing the task but also relating to the client's needs. Therapist, coach and consultant Harlene Anderson suggests that we engage in a respectful relational partnership by “entering the relationship as a learner who listens and responds by trying to understand the client from their perspective and in their language” (Anderson & Gehart, p. 45).

Carol Beck, a videographer, reminds freelancers to respect the fact that it is work for hire and not to confuse with art:

*Your clients are not going to tell you how great you are (LAUGHS). If I get a thank you at the end of a project, it's a big day. You can't confuse work for hire with art. If I want to make art, it's on my own time. This is work for hire. They get to make decisions. You can make recommendations, guide them, educate them – but ultimately their video, their money, and their consequences. If it's a bad video, it's their decision – even if they decide to throw you under the bus – it's their video.*

If there is a problem with a timeline or if unforeseen circumstances arise, it is important for the freelancer to immediately discuss this with the client so they can propose solutions together and in advance. Keeping your word is essential to the independent worker especially in the age of social media where the quality of your work can be bantered about on Twitter.

## **Sustainability On The Edge: Would Trade Freedom For Dental**

Given the long recession, I expected to find the financial sustainability of these freelancers more in jeopardy than I have. They are still working and like all Americans have adapted their expectations and are appreciative for the fact that they are treading water better than most. A few of the journalists were finding the decrease in rates disconcerting as is the case with Ayad Rahim, because as he says his conservative views are more “narrowcast.” He is adapting by starting a sideline rental and reconstruction business along with going back to graduate school in another field. His story is a critical reminder of the necessity of lifelong education to keep afloat.

All the freelancers involved with this dissertation, because of years of experience, have fared better because of diversified portfolios; but they must hustle more because the rates have decreased, while the time it takes to receive a check has increased. But make no mistake, the compromised rates have forced them to work longer and harder and it has affected their quality of life. It's good enough but not great given the harsh economic reality everyone encountered after the recent economic meltdown. A few have moved to full-time employment and others are considering their next move. Even with full-time, the new American workforce is stalled because of decreased wages and higher inflation. No longer is your work style standalone: many full-time employees are developing sideline ventures; some are working multiple part-time jobs while freelancing but also considering starting

their own business or returning to full-time work; and the chronically underemployed may have to think about relocating to North Dakota. Americans are working harder, longer, and faster – and the attention to quality of life is coming to the forefront as a key issue for everyone.

It is important to keep in mind that the majority of the freelancers involved with this project have been working 15 – 30 years in varying configurations of freelance, part-time, and full-time work. The following vignettes are snapshots of how financial adaptability coupled with talent and relational skills keep the freelancers afloat while quality of life is somewhat adrift. Many of these perpetual adaptive workers view their own sustainability at this point in time as fine but have seen significant reductions. They are contemplating their next move and this will be explored in “*The Takeaway: Freelancers’ Sustainability Includes Rethinking Their Work Style Possibilities*” at the end of this chapter.

### **Would Gladly Trade Freedom For Dental; Freelancers Are Attentive to Healthful Practices**

jimi izrael, a nationally recognized columnist and commentator on NPR’s *the Barbershop*, comments on the sustainability issue:

*There just isn’t enough money. It’s a lot of work. I feel lucky with these circumstances. I can make my own work or work comes to me. It could be worse. No work could be coming and I’d be really fucked up.*

jimi comments that he enjoys the freedom of the freelance life but candidly quips, “*I’d gladly trade some freedom for dental.*” The lack of affordable medical coverage is a growing concern for freelancers when you consider that over 30 percent of the adult population is self-employed according to the Freelancers Union.

As mentioned earlier, jimi has experienced a 60-percent decline in the past four years in terms of income and notes, “. . . *I’m making a really average salary versus at one point I was making six figures.*” Recently remarried, jimi is looking for a teaching position and is also moving more into the scriptwriting realm. He continues to work on his independent projects.

When it comes to journalistic writing, the rates have declined but screenwriting is a venue where the returns are higher as Alan McElroy illustrates, but clearly compromised as described below.

### **Need to Clear A Million To Make \$150,000**

Alan McElroy, a screenwriter with a recent lucrative six-figure deal, addresses the increased competition level and how that has changed industry rates:

*In the last few years, it has drawn a lot more people. In the late 80’s, screenwriters became very powerful. Shane Black was pulling in millions of dollars for screenplays. Shane Black sold ‘The Long Kiss Goodnight’ for 4-million. Joe Eszterhas sold a treatment called ‘One Night Stand’ for 4-million. There was a*

*backlash because studios did not like the idea of screenwriters having that much power. So they stopped buying everything and put screenwriters back in their place. The numbers went way down. The potential for screenwriting brought a flood of screenwriters into the industry.*

For Alan, he has an entourage (e.g. lawyer, manager, agent, etc.) to keep his business on track. As a member of the Writer's Guild, his rates are proportionately larger than most freelancers – “60 to 70 thousand for an absolute minimum. As you work, your pay incrementally climbs. If you work with independents, you have to adjust because money is an issue.” He is quick to point out that even with an agent he must relationally connect as a freelancer:

*Your agent is incredibly valuable because they create the relationships. They know who's out there looking for a writer – who's looking for open writing assignments. They'll connect me with the executives with various companies. It's up to me to connect with the executives and build on that idea. That's where today it's becoming such a headache. This year has been brutal. You come to them with an idea and what they want is a 'take.' A 'take' is where they give you a one-liner or a paragraph – and you build a pitch out of it –on spec.*

On spec, means that the writer is not getting paid and Alan explains, “A lot of times you'll come up with a take. But then maybe they'll need pages. It's like can you give me a couple of pages so I can give it to my boss? Then you'll do that. Then you still might not get paid and you're putting a lot of time into it.”

Alan was the recent recipient of a lucrative bidding war for his latest script, “Man and Wife,” with proposed director Akiva Goldsman who wrote “A Beautiful Mind ”and “Cinderella Man” and discusses the bidding process:

*You take a script to a number of buyers. What you hope is that Sony will be interested and they'll offer X amount of dollars. Another studio will also want the script and basically you get into a bidding war. Well they offered \$300,000 and what are you going to offer? We'll go for 350. Guess what they're going for 350. What are you going to do? What you hope for is escalation.*

Alan McElroy is very candid about the cost factors and the reality behind the numbers:

*The reality is that the number might sound great. You're making six figures. On top of that I pay an agent 10%. I have a lawyer who I pay 5%. I have a business slash financial manager for my personal corporate that I pay 800-bucks a month. That's a car payment for a Mercedes. Because you have to manage the taxes involved with having a personal corporation and income tax. I tried to do it myself and the paperwork was insane. It's a lot. Dues you pay the Writer's Guild. I think one or two percent? It's not that much. You're getting nickel and dined all the way down it depends how much your making. I'm in the top tax bracket and paying 36 percent. Then another 25- percent to my “people” – then taxes – and then taxes coming off the top of whatever that number was. . .*

*. . . By the end of day, it's like what Red Foxx said, ‘you have to make a million*

*dollars to clear \$150,000.' By the end of the day, I take home about 35-percent of what I make. It's a huge hit if you think about it.*

## **The Manager Is A Personal Trainer for Business**

Many of the freelancers who are doing well have had accountants direct them through the tax structure for the self-employed. Alan, not only has a lawyer, agent, accountant, but also a manager to guide his creative decision making process:

*My agent just throws projects at me. This person has a project – that person has a project. My manager says, 'this project is a waste of time.' 'That person will never come through – this is what you need to focus on. There are a lot of people I know who have a manager and no agent. They trust what their manager is doing and saying. I have a great agent – they do a fantastic job for me. But I can work out stories with my manager.*

*Actually he came to me with a project. My management company is Circle of Confusion and they represent a lot of comic books. He came to me with a bunch of comic books. But we got to talking and found out we had a lot in common. What I liked about him was that he was very candid. Because of that I said, 'I need to focus my career and feel that I'm scattered. I want to take it to the next level.'*

*He challenged me on the script for 'Man and Wife' about this particular aspect of this one character. I fought him for about four months. I didn't believe in it or see it his way. Then an idea coalesced in my head about this one character and it was what he said. I finally saw what he was talking about and it made the entire script sing. He's more like my therapist. He's very smart about story. I don't think all managers are like him. This guy is great for characters.*

Alan would describe his manager as a personal trainer for business and writing. Because the industry has become so hard to get work, “*You need as many people working for you as possible – as many fingers out there searching to find work.*”

## **Diversification for Self-Preservation; Name Brand Clients Add Value**

Carol Beck, a videographer, acknowledges that her career is sustainable at this point in time – “*I certainly go through ups and down with the economy. I've weathered this recession much better than a lot of people I know in similar roles.*” When I asked Carol, how she managed to survive the storm she humorously, insightfully comments:

*Because I'm better – also, because I have a diversified client base. I made the mistake early on in my career of letting one client become 70% of my business. That client went belly up. It was really a rough time. I learned it was important to diversify. It's important for the clients you work for to also have a diverse portfolio. I had a lot of automotive clients and we know how that turned out. If all your clients are automotive, it's not good. If all your clients are pharmaceutical, it's not good. You want diversification – automotive, hotel work, and technology. It's very rare that everything will go down at the same time. I did a big job for a client that*

*specializes in mortgage placed insurance. Guess when that goes way up – when there's a lot of repos. They have big bucks to spend on media. So you want as many companies in different industries represented.*

Carol's cultural observations about the big client winners and losers in the recession are on target: *"With the recession what went in the toilet? Consumer electronics cars. People are always sick so it's good to have health client. In fact in a recession, people spend more on booze and professional care. Things to make themselves feel better."*

Carol mentions that it is helpful having nationally recognized clients when it comes to her work:

*I'm usually a couple of layers down in subcontracting. Generally there is a big client – a Panasonic, Ford Motor Company – and they hire an event company or a production company – event people usually sub out the media production – and that's me. A lot of times I need them to help prepare packages or they need my bio in their pitch. That goes out in a lot of pitch packages – she's worked for blah, blah, blah. Yeah. I often have large clients who are more profitable but are not household names. They are a huge, profitable company that nobody has heard of – but when I say to IBM – they know.*

Brand recognition alone, just like talent, is not enough to make freelance sustainable. The freelancer must be able to move beyond giving the client exactly what they want – and provide a mutually coordinated level of relational performance that is win-win for both parties. Is the freelancer able to put other people at ease and make the set or interaction with a client a healthy and vibrant work environment? If it is an agreeable collaboration, then there is a good chance the freelancer will work with the client again. The ability to create a healthy set or work relationship starts with freelancers that are energetic and balanced.

For Carol, the ability to find balance and peace is incorporated in positive mind/body practices that include meditation, exercises and healthy eating and notes:

*The hardest thing about freelance is finding time in the day to be good to yourself – to exercise, to meditate, to make healthy meals – to do those things you need to maintain balance. That's the hardest part. I have gotten better at it. I haven't had a proper workout in two weeks. You just get back on the horse and go again. It's an absolute necessity. If I don't meditate and exercise, I get strung out. If you're eating crap food you feel sluggish and awful. I have a few indulgences in my life. One is a personal trainer that I see a couple of times a week – because she is the thick blue line between diabetes and me because of my genetics. The other is I have a housekeeper come in once a month and do a thorough scrub down. Until I had the housekeeper, there were so many things I could never get to and I was working all the time. I'd never sit on the couch and read a book or watch a movie.*

Her Buddhism intersects with her community, work, and is connected to all aspects of her life including a philosophy that doesn't let her get crazy about work. She appreciates the remarks of the Buddhist pandita Shantideva: *"If there's something to be done about it, why worry? If there's nothing to be done about it why worry?"* These words guide Carol's

work *"If you need to get out there and hustle some contacts—then hustle some contacts. If you've hustled everybody you know to hustle – then you need to chill."*

## **Mutable Sustainability**

Kate Farrell, an executive producer, is now working full-time with WE-tv in New York City after working for decades as a freelancer. She is extremely versatile and has fluidly moved through many types of work configurations with ease and on a wide array of projects. In many ways, Kate is an exemplary model of being a great work improviser. She also is at a generative time in her career when she recognizes her own value and competencies but is willing to share her projects and expertise with other folks. When asked about her sustainability she replies:

*Oh yeah. What happens is that you're not necessarily the hired gun. In the past, I would go on the road to do pieces, edit them on site and then participate in putting the live show together. I do less of that these days. I am interested in developing ideas with people I think have an interesting angle on a show. I am currently working with a science institute on a potential project, a friend is doing a personal documentary, I know a farmer who would be great on a series and a friend who is a great southern chef. I would like to develop any of those into something. Freelance is sustainable as long as you are willing to shift what you do. I worked for a not-for-profit and built websites. I didn't know anything about building websites. Now I know what wizzy-wig means.*

When asked what would help grow her freelance practice, Kate notes, *"I prefer to stay on the east coast but a lot of series shoot in L.A. But I will travel, I will relocate temporarily and pitch myself as someone who can make an idea have legs."* The kind of flexibility expressed by Kate is essential if one is to freelance and it becomes more of a challenge when raising a family and comments:

*I think you may talk to people who feel differently because they are putting kids through college or have a big monthly nut. I'm lucky enough that the kids in my family are not using me as their financial support. I don't have college bills. People who are raising a family will give you different answers. But for me, it's worth it because you can make a lot of money in TV in my opinion. It's worth it because you have time off to refresh or rejuvenate.*

## **Digital Revolution Has Created More Demand**

Although access to inexpensive equipment has created more competition, there is also more demand according to documentary filmmaker Laura Paglin:

*In some ways it's good – now everyone has to have a website and marketing video. There's more demand – it's also less expensive if you have multiple skills – editing, directing and shooting.*

Laura is quick to point that she is trying to avoid low paying jobs and notes, *"I don't take a lot of 'cheapie' things because they can zap a lot of time and energy. I wish the budgets*

were a little bit bigger but compared to other things what can you do?” Laura recognizes the advantages of her family:

*I think if I didn't come from a middle class family with some cushion for support – or if Duane wasn't working and didn't have a 'normal' job with benefits it would be hard. In my 30s, it was a hand-to-mouth existence. When you're older, you don't want to go without health insurance.*

She acknowledges that having a partner helps otherwise “I'd have to do more in the market to promote my videos.” Lately, Laura has fused both her commercial and documentary websites into Creative Filmmakers. Click the link to view how she has merged them (<http://www.creativefilmmakers.org/home.html>). She explains why she co-joined the two enterprises:

*The idea is to use the money from the marketing videos to pay for the documentaries. I need to do more of that because it's so much easier than a documentary and you can still tell a story. Then you get your check. It starts and it's done – and people are really happy. That's a lot nicer than spending all of your time writing grants. If I were really brilliant I would learn to expand. I know a lot of freelancers with small businesses who go through this. You can't grow unless you hire someone else. But then if you hire that person you might not have enough to pay them or you can't really sustain them.*

*I'd really love to have a studio that that wasn't in the house. Then I could have people come and go and probably get more done. I'm trying not to think too far in the future or I'll drive myself crazy. Again, I don't need as much because I'm not supporting four kids. My lifestyle doesn't demand much. This is the cheapest house on the street. We don't live beyond our means. We don't have a McMansion. And we live in Cleveland.*

Laura's documentary films, with the gritty backdrop of Cleveland, cover subjects from e-preparatory schools changing lives of inner city kids to urban elections meltdowns. Her riveting documentaries are receiving national and international attention (see her appreciative reflection).

### **Sustainability Is Questionable: The Internet Cheapens Pay**

When asked if his work as a journalist is sustainable, Ayad Rahim, a cultural commentator with work in major national publications and a well-received *New York Times* blog, responds:

*No. Yes, if you have a good product and it's sellable and there's a market for it. But then again, the Internet does pay much. I've received \$100 for some Internet articles, but most don't pay anything. Even 'Investor's Business Daily' doesn't pay anything for unsolicited submissions. A lot of opinion pieces don't pay, like 'The Wall Street Journal,' 'The Boston Globe.' I was able to get paid because I said, 'this is what I do for a living.' For most people, It's an outlet for a professor or a think-tank person to get their name out there. The New York Times Blog gave me \$500 a*

*month and I produced four articles. It's something, but I put a lot of work into it.*

With the pay for Internet blogs and articles declining, Ayad is currently attending graduate school and becoming involved in a rental and renovation business while writing on the side. As a creative individual, improvisation is synonymous with improvement. We not only need an adaptable workforce but an educational system that clearly recognizes learning new skills is ever-present, continuous, and interdisciplinary. The new non-traditional workforce is not thinking “majors” but want complementary certification that credits life experience, offers affordability, and does not require moving; and most importantly recognizes virtual education as a viable alternative.

### **Rates Are Declining in Advertising; Still Sustainable But Retirement Is Elusive**

Sheryl White, a nationally recognized advertising copywriter, is the first to confess that she's not great at price negotiation, *“If they throw out a number and say 200 less – I'll say okay. I'm really a bad negotiator.”* Sheryl talks about how the rate for a copywriter has gone down. Like many in this business she knows her bottom-line limit:

*It's hard to get \$75 an hour. Most are trying to go with a \$500 day rate. I won't go for less than \$700 a day. Unless it's a long-term gig and then I'll bring it down because I'll have a steady income for the next two months.*

Sheryl suggests that the rate has declined, *“It used to be a lot more. A lot more.”* On a personal note, I remember my own rates, in the late 90s and early 2000s, being \$80-100 for freelance writing on Internet and advertising projects. Sheryl comments, *“That's what we should be paid. People are getting \$1500 a day. I'm in direct response. I was in general when I started. Pharmaceutical always paid top dollar.”*

I ask Sheryl if it is becoming more of a freelance world in the advertising arena? She replies:

*It's hard to say. It's kind of like cable when it first came out. Everybody expected to see a huge revolution – and there wasn't. It came out years later and it was. People want you to be more virtual – but they also want you on staff so they can see what you are doing. More competition is definitely there. They're going to make the rates drop as low as they can. Unfortunately, somebody will take it (PAUSES). There is a shop – it's called “Creative Urgency” (NAME CHANGED) – when a job comes out they send it out to everyone they think is right for the job. Usually, they pay you so little -- 25 to 30 dollars an hour. And what they mean is that depending on experience they are paying you 50. What I found out is “Creative Urgency” (NAME CHANGED) -- sure they're in to make money – what they charge is triple of what you're getting paid. They make three-quarters more and I refuse to work for people like that.*

Sheryl continues to speak to the decrease in rates and attributes it to so much competition:

*And people don't really care if you're doing something that should really take a week*



*or month. I'm all for people doing projects quickly – but these expectations are ridiculous. They're squeezing everything they can out of us. They'll burn you out and you'll be working through the night many times – and for what – 500 dollars a day? Plus they take six months to pay. People used to pay within 30-days. Now the soonest you'll get paid is 60-days and it's more like 6-months."*

Even with the decreased wages, when I ask Sheryl if it's sustainable she quickly responds, *"Totally sustainable. I've been sustaining it for years."* Sheryl mentions that she's ready to retire from the business, *"I don't like the way it's going and I always felt that I couldn't transition because I've been really bad with money. So I have to work until I'm dead. A lot of people feel that way."*

With two residences, Sheryl recently moved out of her Manhattan location and is now living in Woodstock as a way to save \$60,000 a year and states, *"I wouldn't mind getting out of this business. You do burn out."* When I ask Sheryl if she sees the industry going the independent route she responds:

*That changes from day to day. Some days they want more freelancers and at two points every year there's a freeze on freelancers – and then all the agencies follow. It's usually at budget times. In my world people want specialists – people who do cars or healthcare. I refused to specialize in any one thing. Because I wanted to be a general writer. I wanted to be able to walk in somewhere and pick up and go. It hurt me for a few years – but after a while everyone wanted a generalist. The business is like a chameleon – it changes everyday.*

She mentions that a lot of the agencies are going out of business, *"people are leaving the big agencies. Instead of looking for another job – they start a little agency of their own. There's a lot of that going on."* I assumed the big are going out of business and she quickly replies, *"No, the big are buying up a lot of other agencies."* There are a lot of changes in the industry and Sheryl has seen it all. I asked if she ever wanted to go back to a full-time job? *"I like not being beholden to anybody but myself – because I think my values are stronger than theirs."* I wonder if it's a conscious decision? Sheryl says, *"Sometimes it was and sometimes it wasn't. It's economically driven and I got laid off. I've been in and out of freelance for a long time."* Sheryl is not quite ready to retire but is contemplating a change and moving out of New York City was a first step.

## **Project Creation Is A More Viable Option; Everyone is a Freelancer Now**

Marc Jaffe, a comedy writer and co-creator of the Parkinson Foundation *Shaking With Laughter*, states, *"Because of the nature of the business, you're a freelancer always – even when you have a job – it's a temporary job."*

Marc is quick to acknowledge that project creation is a more viable option than freelance. He notes, *"I remember when I first started out and was trying to do freelance copywriting for advertising and so many places said, 'it's so rare when we get the fun stuff that we want that for ourselves.'" There is no doubt that freelance is no longer about just working on other people's venture, but is about becoming more entrepreneurial and creating your own work.*

Marc exemplifies the improvisational, creative freelance career that intersects with both his personal and professional life as he demonstrates with his game show *Bonk* (<http://www.bonkgameshow.com/index.htm>); inventions such as the magical *Elijah Drinks* cup (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozRlky5b0yw>); and co-creating the *Shaking With Laughter* foundation, to raise money for Parkinson research (<http://shakingwithlaughter.org/shaking.html>). Marc represents the new face of freelance that has shifted from working on other people's projects to initiating his own work.

## The New Sustainability Explores Quality of Life Issues

The alternative health movement and the drive to embrace environmental sustainability are all part of the same holistic framework that is laying the foundation for conversations about what makes work vital, renewable and meaningful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Media freelancers were the early improvisers in creating a balanced life in spite of working in a tension-filled creative industry of high performance expectations and exacting deadlines. A critical aspect attributing to their longevity and sustainability was being able to recharge physically, emotionally and spiritually while at the same time making a livable wage. The capacity to reinvigorate is essential for all workers but more so in an industry that feeds off creative energy or good stress – otherwise the depletion can cause distress. Media freelancers comprised of screenwriters, graphic and web designers, audio engineers, videographers, experimental filmmakers, documentarians, and journalists – come together with purposeful intensity to create, collaborate, and then leave to recharge.

For many creative individuals, the top down corporate management hierarchy has never been particularly inviting and here it was easy to be marginalized or typecast in that kind of environment. In the last decade, Appreciative Inquiry has gained momentum and has been instrumental in challenging the way we view organizational change management, innovation, and sustainability. The appreciative approach, attempts to involve all organizational stakeholders, and facilitate improvement by giving voice to “what’s working” rather than participating in a deficit discourse that fuels toxicity. The goal is to create an environment where the whole self is invited to work allowing for creativity, learning, civility, diversity, cooperation, and advancement.

The enterprises frequently making the top of the list in magazines such as *Fast Company* for innovation include Facebook, Twitter, Patagonia, Google, Amazon, Starbucks, Chipotle and even the Occupy Movement provide an employee focused environment. Click to read the 2012 list from *Fast Company* on *The World's 50 Most Innovative Companies* (<http://www.fastcompany.com/most-innovative-companies/2012/full-list>). What is the essential attribute of great place to work?

The answer is that great employers must shift the focus on trying to get more out of people, to investing more in them by addressing their four core needs – physical, emotional, mental and spiritual – so they're freed, fueled and inspired to bring the best of themselves to work every day. (Shwartz, 2011)

The word burn out is becoming more commonplace as individuals describe working longer and harder in many work style configurations just to stay afloat. As Steven Tatar, a very creative entrepreneur who is trying to jump-start the production for Ohio Knitting Mills, quietly says, “*I’m burnt out (LOWERS VOICE) – I’m burnt out.*” He has been actively working at working and laments:

*I’ve gone from year-to-year, month-to-month, and now we’re going week-to-week practically. Yesterday, I found out that I’m getting paid for work I thought was pro bono. Plus I picked up new work. I said ‘thank God.’ I think I may make it through August. . . I’ve gotten calls from Fossil, Levis, WP Lavori, Pendleton, and all these companies are interested and somebody needs to take a step. It would be nothing for Levis – I know they’ve shrunk and had a tough time – but they’re doing well again. They’re still a 4+ billion dollar company. They can take a couple of million dollars out from between the cushions of their couch and launch this company and just say, ‘We’ll throw a couple of million at you and here’s our goals.’*

We cannot squander talent, who demonstrate ingenuity and a stellar work ethic, by focusing solely on shareholder’s bottom-line dollars and not investing in the quality of people’s lives. Peter Drucker, the business visionary, when asked by David Cooperrider at Case Western Reserve University’s Weatherhead School of Management “Can social responsibility also be profitable?” replies:

It’s not whether social responsibility can be profitable to business he said, but rather how profitable business can make social responsibility. That day, he (Peter Drucker) declared to me something we should all remember: ‘Every single social and global issue of our day is a business opportunity in disguise’ (Copperrider, 2008, p. 32).

The companies that people want to work for, one’s that address quality of life concerns, are profitable because the turnover is not as high and less money is spent on recruiting talent. A healthy employee base has the capacity to generate to a more progressive, future-forward work outlook.

## **In Search of More Relational Moments**

In a series in the Harvard Business Review, “*Bringing Your Whole Self to Work,*” there are many articles focusing on the debilitating hardship placed on workers challenged with burn out, stress overload, media diets of bad news, toxic worry, sleep deficits, and unrelenting work loads.

Toxic worry is an examination of how we are losing human or relational moments. Edward Hallowell, a psychiatrist treating anxiety disorders, has been working with businesspeople for 20+ years warns of the consequences of overindulging in technology, isolating, and moving away from human moments. Hallowell emphasizes, “The human moment has two prerequisites: people’s physical presence and their emotional and intellectual attention” (Hallowell, 2008, p. 26).

Hallowell is suggesting that the disappearance of human moments is altering the brains chemistry as we get swallowed up by synthetic moments of virtual answering machines,

ATMs, voice mails, emails, texts, etc. Everyone has the experience of getting stuck in the endless loop of phone answering centers with the not quite human voice keeps telling us “to press star for more options” as we desperately try to connect with a real customer service representative – and then we are placed on hold – and then hold again and again. Often we get angry and have to call again, this also adds insult to injury. This supposedly time saving transaction has just cost us 20 futile minutes and we are not pleased.

As we all know, an email or text message cannot replace a heart-to-heart, real-time, real-space conversation with a colleague or friend. Freelancers, long in the adaptive mode, learned to take the time to meet with friends in a coffee shop for human connection and idea generation. The new emerging open offices allow independents to intersect with a more interdependent, vibrant shared workspace.

A shared human moment requires something that is now in short demand and that is energy, but we need it for precisely that reason because this face-to-face conversation has the dual capacity to energize. Hallowell emphasizes:

Human moments require energy. Often, that’s what makes them easy to avoid. The human moment may be seen as yet another tax on our overextended lives. But a human moment doesn’t have to be emotionally draining or personally revealing. In fact, the human moment can be brisk, businesslike, and brief. A five-minute conversation can be a perfectly meaningful human moment. To make the human moment work, you have to set aside what you’re doing, put down the memo you were reading, disengage from your laptop, abandon your daydream, and focus on the person you’re with. Usually when you do that, the other person will feel the energy and respond in kind. Together, you quickly create a force field of exceptional power. The positive effects of a human moment can last long after the people involved have said goodbye and walked away. People begin to think in new and creative ways; mental activity is stimulated. (Hallowell, p. 2008, p. 26)

As Hallowell suggests, these relational moments must occur on a regular basis to have a lasting, positive, and invigorating effect in the workplace. Kate Farrell, a reality television producer, has a knack for making her team feel comfortable and notes, “*When I supervise a team, I ask if they need anything. I feel I can tune into the person who has been left out.*” Kate mentioned how the small gesture of getting a Starbucks gift certificate was a simple way to say thank you to a hard working employee. When this employee had a chance to work on another popular reality show, “*Keeping Up With The Kardashians*,” she decided to continue on the show because Kate made her feel valued. The work improvisers in this project continually relate that proximity and face time are critical to their personal and professional success. As many of the project participants have mentioned they are skilled at having real-time relational negotiations and moments with collaborators. They are also comfortable being able to retreat and work; and then sharing the process and project via a virtual platform. What works is that all these participants are equally adept at integrating relational and virtual moments with their clients or collaborators.

## **The Takeaway: Freelancers' Sustainability Includes Rethinking Their Work Style**

The project participants involved with this dissertation are extremely resourceful, adaptive, and have the kind of over-the-horizon radar that's allows them to remain viable. They are literally migrant creatives as they have entered multiple work relationships and have adapted with ease.

It is interesting to see people who were invested in freelancing for over a decade starting to reconsider their own work style options as the big payoff of freelance – quality of life – is being challenged by time compression, eroding rates, increased healthcare, and inflation. The allure of freelance is still there but new work options are emerging as companies are starting to embrace quality of life issues and court creative talent. There was a time when these innovative individuals would not be challenged enough to seek full-time employment because their high-octane brains and energy would be seen as suspect and therefore potentially marginalized. The more evolved enterprises have finally grasped the importance of having talented, challenging and creative individuals at the helm. All the individuals involved with this project are precisely what an innovative organization needs: project-focused individuals who have been successful at coloring inside and outside the lines; collaborators who understand concept-to-completion tasks; and respectful, responsible leaders who demonstrate relational connectedness; and most importantly these folks can be trusted to keep their word.

As more people migrate to freelance work, the media freelancers are again leading the pack and are thinking about new options; this includes entertaining the idea of a full-time situation, starting a business, investing in their own project creation, and maybe combining multiple options. What we can learn about sustainability from freelancers is that it is all about collaboration, taking the time to foster relational connections, improvising, embracing not knowing, and having conversations that invite possibility in order to make a difference and foster change. Sustainability, personal and professional, is about cultivating more human moments without having any expectations or projected outcomes and this letting go invites in genuine connection as one of the key ingredients to creating a more interesting life.

## VIII. The Generative Years: Living What's Next

***“I don’t consider myself a recording engineer only. My recommendation to anyone coming up is that your education not only be technical but also heavy on content and cross-disciplined. If you live in a specialized technical education box like a recording engineer it’s not enough. You will not be able to freelance. You won’t be able to understand billing -- business concepts -- how things fit in the world -- how cash flow works -- financials -- sales -- understand human beings – and that comes with experience with rare exceptions. I’m not condemning youth. I’m just saying the schools are narrowly educating people under job training lines and not within the classical liberal arts education. I happened to have good people in college who taught me and said you can never understand Beethoven without understanding the politics, economics of his time. Knowing the history of where it came from in terms of the technical and understanding enough when it comes to other subjects that relate will help you to run a business as a freelancer.”***

***Bill Cavanaugh, Audio Engineer***

# The Generative Years: Living What's Next

## The Social Construction of Aging and Creativity

All of the project participants, many ranging in age from around 40 to 60+ years, are still working and hanging tough in spite of a recession. There are moments when they are conscious of aging in a youth-fixated industry but they choose not to obsess precisely because they position themselves and co-create with many positive age-related possibilities. A few of these include having a broader perspective and a gaze for “what’s possible” which allows them to prioritize multiple demands along with the peripheral vision to assess and act on other options that are not readily apparent. The added years of experience make these folks a little smarter because they know they’ve been through a similar situation before and they have the ability to recognize the historical and social context for change and this understanding promotes greater acceptance rather than taking it personally (e.g. recession and reduced rates).

Yet there is a “crass ceiling” that many media workers, regardless of workstyle, are having trouble reconciling and that is the social construction (see *Literature Review*) of a culture that primarily associates creativity and work vitality with youth. Like the “glass ceiling,” where women and minorities felt excluded from breaking through into the upper echelons of management, the “crass ceiling” is a phrase I used to reveal the quiet, often unspoken barriers that these participants feel as seasoned veterans working in a youth-fixated industry. They respond accordingly with a self-imposed silencing when it comes to mentioning age because they do not want to be penalized over something they cannot control, yet they have a lot to say. There are plenty of articles emerging about the importance of having a balanced intergenerational workforce, however this message needs to reach the creative industries where youth-culture still rules. This chapter not only examines various participants’ voices on aging in a pro-youth industry, but also demonstrates how they are becoming new role models for working longer, smarter, and better in an age-adverse culture and how their presence is vital evidence that creativity thrives at any age.

There is a shifting social construction of aging prompted by new studies (Cohen, 2005; Small & Vorgan 2008) on creativity and brain malleability along with demographic and economic changes (Newman, 2011). The move away from stereotypical age segregation toward greater coexistence is examined in *The New Aging: Self Construction and Social Values*:

As life-span doyen, Bernice Neugarten (1980), proposed almost 20 years ago, we are slowly becoming an age-irrelevant society, in the sense that we are ‘becoming accustomed to the 28 year old mayor. . .the 50 year old retiree, the 65 year old father of a preschooler and the 70 year old student. (Gergen, K. & Gergen, M, 2000)

Although age acceptance is widening, the participants in this project are nonetheless in a media culture that reinforces the notion that edginess, risk taking, and creativity belongs to the young. However, a common thread for many of these participants is their ability to sense trends and to be ahead of the curve. All of these media creators, forging an improvisational path of creative invention or reinvention, are busy developing “what’s next” (e.g. Kasumi, a recent Guggenheim recipient, working on an edgy feature-length experimental video; Marc Jaffe inventing *Elijah Drinks* or co-creating a Parkinson’s research foundation *Shaking With Laughter*; Bill Cavanaugh one of the early designers of a portable 32-track recording system; or Steven Tatar branding Ohio Knitting Mills and attempting to start production in the United States for his fabulous collection of 1940s – 1970s knitwear. Read individual *Appreciative Reflections* for all aforementioned participants.

By the year 2015, “more than half of all people 65-69 are expected to be in the labor force” (Newman, K., 2011, p. 136). As we continue to primarily focus on aging as a “deficit discourse” (Gergen, 1994), which entails viewing aging through a lens of something to be fixed or taken care of, then we are short-changing people of all ages who eventually will also move closer to the reality of mortality. We are living in a swirling change of shifting beliefs about work, relationships, loyalty, and even retirement.

## Viewing Creativity and Aging Through Another Lens

Gene D. Cohen, author and pioneering researcher in the area of geriatric psychiatry who also served as founding director of the Center on Aging, Health & Humanities at George Washington University, shifted the developmental focus on aging from a problem discourse to one that explores potential. Cohen challenged the belief that the “older adults can’t learn as well as young people” and was also clear to point out that it was the ravages of disease and not aging which affected the brain (Cohen, 2005, p. 3). This caused a significant transitional shift “from seeing negative changes with aging as being one’s destiny to a new view of modifiable age-associated problems was a huge leap in itself” (Cohen, G., 2006, p. 7).

Cohen’s research belies the notion of devolved creativity as we age and suggests that there are areas where the mature brain can be advantageous:

The brain is continually resculpting itself in response to experience and learning; new brain cell do form throughout life; the brain’s emotional circuitry matures and becomes more balanced with age; and the brain’s two hemispheres are more equally used by older adults. (Cohen, G., 2005, p. 4).

The new advances in studying the plasticity of the brain shatters the belief “that nerve cells cannot re-grow and the brain does not create new neurons” (Cohen, G., 2005, p. 11). Cohen suggests that challenging mental activities and vigorous physical exercise seems to ‘juice’ the brain. Csikszentmihaly, the author of *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, admits he was surprised at how many of the people involved with his groundbreaking creativity study expressed little change as they aged:



In general, the respondents did not see much change between their fifties and seventies, or sixties and eighties. They felt that their ability to do the work was unimpaired, their goals were substantially the same as they had always been, and the quality and quantity of their accomplishments differed little from what they had been in the past. (Csikszentmihaly, M., 1996, p. 212)

Although the media industry is pro-youth, reflected in both personnel and production, the emerging research poses a significant shift in our viewpoint on aging when it comes to creativity and is challenging conventional thinking. In fact, the freelancers involved with this project are not only working but also serving as role models in the creative industries (e.g. advertising, film, television, video, etc.), which were never really age-friendly territory. Why are they thriving? They draw on a wealth of experience and are able to complete the job efficiently and within budget. Nobody is hiring them as eye candy and they already come in poised to work with a reputation for creativity, dependability, and having a different point of view. The other factor in their favor is that age is not as pressing for freelancers since they are submitting portfolios instead of resumes and the employer is not paying benefits or sick days.

The media industry, regardless of age, requires significant vitality, energy, and working smarter because it is an intense deadline-driven business. These freelancers also have the capacity to recalibrate in a high-intensity business and that is a priceless asset for anyone regardless of work style. Many of the participants work with and on intergenerational teams. Nobody has the luxury of working exclusively in one particular cohort group. With a rapidly changing workplace, we cannot summarily dismiss the creative contributions of all our citizens including youth. What is required is looking at a discourse on aging from another lens.

## **Media Freelancers Are Reshaping The Age/Creativity Boundaries**

Media freelancers in this research project are singing a different tune. They are not only reshaping the media world by defying the parameters of age by refusing to retire, but also by bridging the generational divide, maintaining a self-care regimen, and by having the courage to innovate and as documentarian Laura Paglin advocates “try something ridiculous.” They are becoming new role models – modeling the value of experience with age.

### **Bridging the Generational Divide**

The majority of these project participants, even if they fall into the generational category of Boomers (born between 1946 – 1964), operate more like Millennials (early 1980s to mid-2000s) described by James Barrett, a 20-something blogger for *Millennials at Work*:

My opinion is that those members of the Millennial Generation are not interested in the same work-life balance that their older coworkers are interested in. Those more seasoned generations are interested in a more harsh separation between work life

and personal life. They prefer to leave work at work and check their personal lives at the company's front door. I see younger workers less interested in a harsh separation and actually prefer to integrate personal and work into one entity, I guess we could just call that 'life'. I want to be able to work from wherever, whenever. The thought is that work is something you do, not a place that you go. (Salkowitz, 2008, p. 110)

It is interesting that many of the freelancers associated with this study take on a workstyle remarkably similar to the attitude of the "working from wherever, whenever" entrepreneurial and technological mindset of the Millennials but also have the hard driving, take charge work ethic of the Boomers. In *Generation Blend: Managing Across the Technology Age Gap*, the author suggests that the Millennials and Boomers are primed for mutually beneficial mentoring because "Millennials get along with their elders, believe in volunteering their time, are hungry for knowledge, and are actively shopping for mentors" (Salkowitz, p. 2008, p. 235), while the Boomers can update or learn some new technical skills from respectful younger mentors. There is a generational divide but they have learned to coexist and adapt although there are some gripes.

Carol Beck, a video producer and documentary filmmaker, is quick to point out that she does not think colleges are preparing students very well and suggests that students have a sense of entitlement that diminishes the work quality:

*I'm not mentoring a lot of students anymore. It requires a tremendous amount of maturity and independence to be a freelancer. I think students are becoming less mature by the time they graduate from college. I can tell a difference between my generation and younger students. My generation was less mature than my parent's generation. When people were going in wagon trains across North America, what was expected of an eight or nine year old to do was huge. Now people are 28 and still living in their parent's basement and mommy is doing their laundry and making dinner for them. That's not preparing people.*

Carol also notes that she found the same sense of entitlement with students even in India:

*I have experienced that with college students in India. Their lack of self-awareness – It's not that they are bad kids or mean kids – they're just selfish and they don't know it. They don't have any self-awareness to know how their behavior affects others. When you're self-absorbed, it's really hard to form relationships and have the maturity to suck it up if someone criticizes you. That happens a lot to you as a freelancer both legitimately and illegitimately.*

This idea of greater emotional control associated with age is definitely a plus as noted in the book *The Mature Mind* and is another reason why an intergenerational crew should be appreciated especially given the nature of a deadline-driven business where tempers have a tendency to flare:

Older adults experience less negative emotion, come to pay less attention to negative than to positive emotional stimuli, and are less likely to remember negative than positive emotional experiences. This maturation is associated with changes in

the brain's key emotional center, the amygdalae. Our neurological development lays the foundation for better control of anger with aging and improved conflict resolution capabilities. (Cohen, 2005, p. 45-46)

Sheryl White, an advertising copywriter on national accounts, *"Age is not valued. In fact, it hurts you. Experience can help or hurt you. Sometimes they think you are too jaded. They want fresh ideas."* Sheryl notes that during the recession she was in more demand, *"They are now looking to the more experienced to handle work in less time,"* but is also quick to point out *"It can change tomorrow. Nothing is for any length of time in this business. It always changes."* Sheryl is a straight shooter and has learned to deal with getting older in a youth-focused advertising industry:

*It hasn't been a problem for me so far – when I walk into an agency – I'm seeing 12 year olds. I walk in and they're like oh – oh. They think they know more than you. They think that if you're in the business as long as me – you have to be a hack by now. If someone hires me on the recommendation of somebody and it's a very young shop – then I walk in there and I can hear – an old lady hack.*

When I ask Sheryl how quickly the "hack" label leaves, she says, *"It doesn't last long – a few days or a week."* She then adds, *"I think one of the things I'm best at in this business is being a mentor. The kids that I mentor grow up to be heads of agencies."* I ask Sheryl if her protégés call her for work and without a beat she responds, *"All the time."*

This calls to mind a trend that is gaining momentum and that is Boomers teaming with Millennials and this "reciprocal mentoring" works because the common ground is that both groups have a strong social conscience. The group *Hacks and Hackers* is an example of an intergenerational, international coalition of journalists and websites developers getting together for technological advice and support. Click to visit the Hacks and Hackers site (<http://hackshackers.com/about/organizers/>). Reciprocal mentoring, a program initiated by Jack Welch at General Electric in the 1970s, teamed experienced veterans with new employees:

The experiment paid off. It not only helped GE solve a basic problem of knowledge management and cultural continuity, but it also created bonds of trust between the different generations within the company. (Salkowitz, 2008, p. 234)

Perhaps that is one reason why the freelancers involved with this project are still thriving – they have an attitude that bridges the generational divide. The configuration of Boomers and Millennials respectively staying in and entering the workforce in large numbers holds significant promise to affect positive change:

The alignment of old and young generations in today's workplace, with young Millennial go-getters eager to learn and crusading elder Boomers eager to teach, is a far more promising environment for reciprocal mentoring than the ill-favored Gen X-Veteran/Silent combination prevalent in the early 1990s. (Salkowitz, R., 2008, p. 235).

The freelancers contributing to this project are thriving because they are comfortable

integrating new technology, are willing to share knowledge and have the adaptability to act as mentors and role models for working longer and better.

## Age Defying

Those involved in media are constantly reminded that they are in an industry that celebrates youth and creative energy while chastising aging. One just needs to stand in line at the grocery store checkout and read the articles in *The National Enquirer* about starlets who reportedly have not “aged well” after making the ghastly mistake of being seen in public without makeup. Why is it that Clint Eastwood, the director, can be viable and relevant in his eighties – yet he still falls prey to the paparazzi taking pictures of him going shirtless at the beach? Nobody is immune from these unrealistic physical standards and this accounts for a significant rise in the number of people undergoing plastic surgery. The Hollywood fixation on glamour and looks spills over into the media production sector and pollutes practically every professional venue. Hillary Clinton, an indomitable Secretary of State, recently became front-page news when she dared to venture to a function wearing her glasses sans makeup (<http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/339070/20120509/hillary-clinton-without-makeup-pictures-photos-nature.html>). As she humorously mentions in a CNN interview:

I feel so relieved to be at the stage I'm at in my life right now, Jill. Because you know if I want to wear my glasses I'm wearing my glasses. If I want to wear my hair back I'm pulling my hair back. You know at some point it's just not something that deserves a lot of time and attention. (<http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2012/05/08/clinton-addresses-au-nature-moment/>)

Does it make sense to put unrealistic, relentless demands of remaining youthful on everyone? Even Cindy Crawford the supermodel notes, “Even I don’t wake up looking like Cindy Crawford.” It is perhaps harder for media makers to come out in terms of revealing age because they are co-creators in an industry that is heavily vested in creating images that celebrate vitality and youth. Role models for positive aging are hard to come by if people are hesitant to reveal their age for fear of losing their livelihood, as is the case with the Writer’s Guild suit mentioned by Alan McElroy. Nobody lives a retouched life and that is why we must take care to show aging in a less superficial and more real light.

There are many of us as we age that genuinely feel smarter, bolder, and older. However, there is a continuous loop of commercials on television that belie “growing older gracefully” as they pitch an endless array of “age-defying” beauty and body-care products – and even food. The simple message is that aging is something to be avoided. The expression “age defying” is indicative of a culture running scared from the less than desirable dynamics of what aging has come to represent – everything from age spots to erectile dysfunction to incontinence. But where do we see evidence of positive aging and growth?

## Moving Toward A More Positive Conversation About Aging

Kenneth and Mary Gergen, with their online *Positive Aging* newsletter, are on the frontline of reconstructing images of aging in our culture by changing the conversation from one of

debilitation and deficit to one that “brings to light resources – from scientific research on aging, gerontology practices, and daily life – that contributes to an appreciation of the aging process” (<http://www.taosinstitute.net/positive-aging-newsletter>). This newsletter is an excellent departure and one way to start changing the conversation.

All of the participants involved with this project are improvisational media makers are successfully working in an industry that is still not considered age-friendly territory especially when it comes to the creative realm. This an industry that requires a tremendous amount of intellectual firepower and one that is not forgiving when it comes to creative performance pressure regardless of age.

Bill Cavanaugh, a prolific sound engineer, has been working nonstop in the industry since the 1970s and his clients include everyone from popularized music video channels to the History Channel. When asked about how age, creativity and experience were valued in his industry, Bill replies:

*Depends on whom you're dealing with. Like a lot of industries from investment banking to my business, a lot of people are there for social reasons as well as doing a job. If a 22-year-old female producer was coming to a room and sees me she'd say, 'I don't want to work with this old man.' She'd say, 'I'm looking for someone I could get laid with.' I'll be discriminated against in that case.*

*If that producer doesn't know what in God's name she's doing and completely panicked – this happens a lot with music channel producers -- networks use them like toilet paper. (PAUSES) There is this woman who's a big cheese at a music channel. I met her at a party one day and we talked about it. She'd book me with inexperienced producers – and she knew that I would do the job and make the music choices. Music TV works backwards in their promo world. In most commercials, they shoot the picture and edit the picture. Music channels would take prerecorded artists and grab snippets of them and cut up a sound track first. Because they want it to function if the television is on and you're in the other room – that it's still entertaining you even though you're not seeing the picture. You have to make an entertaining soundtrack first. These people would come in with a stack of 50 or 60 CDs and say, 'I don't know what do you think?' I'd say who's the artist? Where are we going? What is this about? Is it about a show – a special?*

Bill is often finding himself in a mentoring role with younger producers and that arrangement has worked out quite well. Although he is quick to point out that many producers in their 40's and 50's say, “I don't want to work with a kid,” and he explains:

*This producer couldn't get me to work on a show because I was pretty booked. He worked with a younger guy on the staff and later said to me it's so good to working with you again. With the young mixer, he was looking for a piece of music – the French National Anthem – and he called it by the French name – and the kid didn't know what it was. Had he wanted the Soviet national anthem I would have known the Internationale.” So experience works in that sense.*

A clue to why they are thriving may have something to do with a broader perspective and

empathy. A recent CNN article on *The Aging Brain: Why Getting Older Just Might Be Awesome* is revealing that empathy, critical to innovation and the human-centered design process, allow designers to connect with and better understand the clientele:

Put another way by design legend Steve Jobs when he spoke to Wired in the 1990s: 'A lot of people in our industry haven't had very diverse experience. So they don't have enough dots to connect, and they end up with very linear solutions without a broad perspective on the problem. The broader one's understanding of the human experience, the better design we will have.' (Enayati, 2012).

As Gene Cohen, the researcher who has studied the capacity for hemispheric fluidity in the brain recounts how people in later life feel the compelling need to find meaning in summarizing the larger story of their life and giving back. Cohen does not just attribute this to having more time on their hands and traces it to new research on the hippocampi:

Recent studies by Eleanor A. Maguire and Christopher D. Frith, of the Institute of Neurology at the University College, London, have discovered a pronounced difference in the activation of the hippocampi of younger and older adults when they are recalling memories from their lives. The older adults used both left and right hippocampi in their tasks, whereas the younger adults used primarily their left. These findings are consistent with those from studies of other brain regions showing greater use of both brain hemispheres in older people. I hypothesize that using both hippocampi during recall of life events creates a richer, more vivid experience because the brain is drawing on a broader palette of resources for the task. . . Using both hippocampi may also simply make recollection itself a more vivid and pleasurable activity. I think the brain, in effect, relishes the chance to deal with autobiography in later life – and to do so using both engines, so to speak. (Cohen, 2005, p. 77)

In essence, those with a healthy creative brain have their mental engines revved up and that is why dismissing the creative contributions of older media workers is not only ageist but also a tragic waste of innovative intellectual capital.

## **Baby Boomers Are Not Retiring**

Baby boomers are not leaving the workforce as evidenced by the freelancers involved with this project. The recent financial crisis coupled with Boomers not being good savers (Newman, 2011) is keeping them in the workforce longer than even they anticipated:

About 80 percent of Boomers have not saved enough money to retire comfortably in their early 60s, and recent financial crisis has only made things worse. As a result, Boomers intend to keep working well past the age of 54 in far greater numbers than previous generations. In 1982, about 20 percent of those in the 65-69 age range were in the labor force. By 2007, that number was 30 percent, and by 2015, more than half of all people 65-69 are expected to be in the labor force. (Newman, K., 2011, p. 136)

For those employed as creative contributors in media, they are inherently up on trends and

are avid consumers of popular culture. All are comfortable with technology, blogging, and multitasking. They are part of an industry that has been catering to segmented marketing and all the participants know how to enter divergent cultures. As they age, they sense that they are treading in new territory as someone who is older. Alan McElroy, a screenwriter, voices the reality of aging in youth-obsessed Hollywood.

Alan McElroy, a screenwriter who just received a six-figure deal for his last screenplay, is still thriving and that is a testament to not only his creativity, but also the power of having sustainable relationships that include friends, family and colleagues. He discusses how advancement within the industry is precarious and whimsical even without the age factor:

*I've watched a guy go from bringing coffee within five years to becoming the president of production in the now defunct Kirshner Locke. There is a progression. People get on people's desks. Then they end up taking that job. Then they move up the ranks of development. Before you know it, they're president of production at some company. It happens very quickly. But it's like shark's teeth, they're all 27-years-old. I get older and all the executives are twenty-seven. (LAUGHS) It's brutal. You have to stay current because they want to hire people who see things their way. They don't want to hire a dad – they want to hire a buddy – somebody they have a kinship with.*

When asked how age, creativity, and experience are valued in your industry Alan responds:

*(CHUCKLES) Poorly. For directors it's good. You can stay pretty late in your career. For writers, forty seems to be the wall. I'll be fifty in October. It seems to be the cutoff. All these executives seem to be 27. They want to hire people that are young.*

Alan McElroy cannot hide his race or age as a writer since meeting with directors, agents, and managers is standard in the industry:

*It's the meeting part. I've got the grey goatee. Candidly speaking I used to dye my goatee before I went to L.A. Then when I tell them the ages of my kids they'd have to reassess. They'd think was a certain age and then realize I was older. I don't feel like dying my hair anymore.*

*Age is still a huge issue. There was a lawsuit brought to a member of the Writer's Guild against the film industry and the TV industry about ageism. I wasn't a part of the suit. But ageism is a huge issue. The fight against being pushed out of our job because you've hit a certain number.*

Marc Jaffe, a comedy writer and member of the Writer's Guild, is a part of the discrimination lawsuit that was recently settled in court to a tune of \$70-million. What is apparent is that this lawsuit was highly unusual as noted in the *Los Angeles Times* article:

The case captured widespread attention because it highlighted what has long been a delicate subject in Hollywood, where complaints about ageism have dogged the industry for years, even inspiring a documentary called *"Power and Fear: The Hollywood Graylist."* Although many writers privately complain about discrimination, few have been willing to take the issue to court for fear of losing their jobs, making

the lawsuit highly unusual. The case won a crucial boost from the Writers Build of America. Although the union was not a party to the case, it provided some of the key demographic research that helped buttress the age-discrimination claims. The guild's periodic diversity reports have found evidence that older workers are underrepresented on writing staffs, particularly at the major networks. (Verrier, R., 2010, January 23)

Jaffe relates his experience when it comes to age and creativity in the comedy arena, "*I think younger age is valued because people want what's new. They want the new hot thing. They want the twenty-year-old market. If you are of that age, they think you can relate better.*" He goes on to discuss the Writer's Guild suit:

*A couple of writers filed suit where they couldn't get agents because they were too old. They were like in their late 30s. I remember when I was younger writing from my head about stuff that was happening around me. The previous generation, even if I thought it was fresh, knew that it was only fresh to my peers.*

This freshness or newness can sometimes be attributed to people not having a broad enough perspective to recognize that it has been done before – or maybe not caring about redundancy which is commonplace in media where successful shows morph and mutate into another version with formulaic predictability. Kasumi, a recent Guggenheim recipient for experimental media art, when asked how she perceived age and creativity were valued in our culture she quickly responds:

*Total ageist society. You live, you learn, you grow, and become competent and – you get better and better – But you're not 19. There used to be a time when people who have attained were respected – musicians, for example. Now in certain fields, the over-thirty set is scorned and shunned. It's an obsession with newness. I mentioned the word 'rebel.' People loved James Dean in 'Rebel Without a Cause' because his attitude was so different – cool – different – saleable. The image becomes a commodity and Hollywood and Madison Avenue embrace the 'rebel.'*

Now we are all wearing the same uniform of nonconformity and Kasumi adds, "*Exactly. Now it's material for my work.*" I ask Kasumi what her plans are for future work and her response is generative, "*More of the same. I'm doing basically what I want to do. Creating, experimenting, and growing.*"

## **The Courage to Try Something Ridiculous**

The real rebels in our culture need the courage to "try something ridiculous" as Laura Paglin, the documentary filmmaker notes. Laura suggests that it is important to learn from young people who are willing to take risks and says, "*I think younger people are not afraid to try something new – and you can learn from that as well. They can learn from the more seasoned.*"

## **Intergenerational Work Crews**

Carol Beck, a videographer for major national accounts and documentaries, candidly discusses aging in the industry:



*We actually talk about this a lot. My friend and favorite DP (Director of Photography) is 58. DP's do very physical work. Most of my favorite crew people are between 45 and 58. We're all in the same generational bracket and have a shared cultural experience. You're most at ease with your own peers. One art department person who I worked with that I really love – when I found out I was the same age as her mother – it was a little disconcerting. She's a real pal and we socialize together.*

Although Carol pointed out that there is an ease hanging with your peer group, new worlds do open when we socialize and work together. When asked if there is anything preventing you from doing this job in your 60s, she is quick to point out variances with recovery time:

*My energy levels don't feel different. This is where I feel it. I don't bounce back from overnight shoots like I used to. I work from about 8 o'clock at night to about 7 in the morning. I used to just crank them out. You work smarter – not harder. One of the gaffers is in his 50s. It's very hard work and he has a great eye. He's moving slower – so you put some beefy young grip on the job and it works out.*

Carol mentions that the compensation of an experienced crew is that you have encountered every problem imaginable and have better judgment from experience. She explains, “*The problem with a lot of young crew people is that if things go wrong they have a meltdown. The oldies are like well we'll just figure it out. There's always a solution.*” There are advantages to the mentoring experience explains Carol, “*I think the youngsters benefit from the experience. How else are you going to learn it?*”

### **The New Role Model: Working Smarter, Longer, and Better**

Kate Farrell, an executive producer with WE-tv, responds to the question about the perceived value of age and experience in the industry:

*I'm going to find out in the next couple of years. I know that nobody was worried about my age when they hired me for this recent job. They needed someone who could turn something around and with enough attitude to tell the other person to calm down and get the job done. They knew I had the creativity and maturity to go in and not make a mess of it – and not go in there with my ego all over the place.*

During the interview, Kate seems pleasantly surprised to hear me say, “*So what I'm hearing is that your skill sets are more valuable now,*” and responds, “*I think they are and it's good to talk to you and hear that out loud.*” Daniel Goleman a co-chair of the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations at Rutgers, suggests that emotional intelligence can be learned and improved at any age:

In fact, data show that, on average, people's emotional intelligence tends to increase at they age. But the specific leadership competencies that are based on emotional intelligence don't necessarily come through life experience. For example, one of the most common complaints I hear about leaders, particularly newly promoted ones, is that they lack empathy. The problem is that they were promoted because they were outstanding individual performers, and being a solo achiever doesn't teach you the skills necessary to understand other people's concerns.

(Goleman as cited in Harvard Business Review, 2008, 126)

Gene Cohen in *The Mature Mind* stresses that midlife reevaluation can produce the following positive qualities: “less impulsive responses to situations and people in daily life, a more thoughtful perspective on work, openness to new ideas or complexity in life, and greater respect for intuitive feelings” (Cohen, G., 2005, p. 63). As Kate acknowledges she does not need to go in there with her “*ego all over the place*.” This coupled with a firm understanding of teamwork makes her actually a better producer because she has the emotional intelligence to motivate rather than alienate coworkers. The capacity for emotional intelligence is definitely something that improves with age and self-awareness.

Kate notes that the reason people hire her is because of the quality of her work and says, “*I know how to tell a good story that you’ll enjoy and cry and laugh. You’re going to be along a road that you want to go down. No matter how old I am – I will be able to do that.*” Kate is a new role model for working smarter, longer, and better.

### **Writers Get Better With Age**

The journalists, who don’t have as much management hierarchy to jump through, tend to work alone and are less subject to age discrimination. Even Alan McElroy, the screenwriter, felt more age-related pressure due to the many personal meetings required in the film industry. Ayad Rahim, a blogger and commentator, notes “*Whenever I send a piece, I say I’ve been doing this for 20 years and have been published in The Wall Street Journal, etc. That’s a foot in the door. I think it’s the opposite of ageism.*” jimi izrael, a commentator on NPR’s *The Barbershop* and writer notes, “*Some of the best writers are the oldest writers – so I wouldn’t say it plays a major role.*”

### **A Self-Care Regimen Is Critical To Career Longevity**

The art of living generatively is not only about generosity of spirit to give back, but also requires a knowing of how to recharge our internal battery to keep the inspirational spark alive. Many of the freelancers involved with this project embrace a self-care regimen of a good diet, exercise, and a spiritual practice in order to stay healthy and recharge from the demands of creative work while also stimulating new ideas.

In an article entitled *The Making of a Corporate Athlete*, in the Harvard Business Review series *Bringing Your Whole Self to Work*, the authors argue that “corporate athletes” who “perform at high levels over the long haul, they must train in the systematic, multilevel way that athletes do” (Loeher & Schwartz, 2008). The authors, who worked with world-class athletes, extend their vision of what it takes for people to perform in an optimal state and this can easily apply to the media freelancer who must apply significant brainpower on command. The authors suggest that peak performance happens when people have rhythmic relaxation rituals that allow them to tap into positive energy at all levels of the high-performance pyramid:

Peak performance in business has often been presented as a matter of sheer brainpower, but we view performance as a pyramid. Physical well-being is its foundation. Above that rests emotional health, then mental acuity, and at the top, a

sense of purpose. The Ideal Performance State – peak performance under pressure – is achieved when all levels are working together. Rituals that promote oscillation – the rhythmic expenditure and recovery of energy – link the levels of the pyramid. For instance, vigorous exercise can produce a sense of emotional well-being, clearing the way for peak performance. (Loeher & Schwartz, 2008, p. 47)

This approach to high intensity work coupled with proportionate relaxation is really something that the freelancers involved with this project inherently have incorporated for a long time. The project participants intuitively know that time off is essential for recalibrating in a high-octane profession such as media. Without the benefits of paid sick days, the freelancers involved with this project have lifelong self-care practices and rituals that allow them to reset on the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual plane. Whether it is a walk in the woods with their dogs, a bike ride or doing headstands, they all appreciate and cultivate their moments for connectivity, recharging and grounding.

Carol Beck, a videographer who hauls plenty of equipment, does not consider her personal trainer a luxury and states:

*The hardest thing about freelance is finding time to be good to yourself – to exercise, meditate, to make healthy meals – to do those things you need to maintain balance. It's a hustle. It's an absolute necessity. If I don't meditate and exercise, I get strung out. If you're eating crap food you feel sluggish and awful. I have very few indulgences in my life. One is a personal trainer that I see a couple of times a week because she is the thin blue line between diabetes and me. The other is I have a housekeeper come in once a month and do a thorough scrub down. Until I had a housekeeper, there were so many things I could never get to and I was working all the time. I'd never sit on the couch and read a book or watch movie.*

Carol recognizes that to recover from a marathon on-location video shoot or a late audio session requires more rest than it did earlier. She also incorporates a regular meditative practice and a personal philosophy that allows her to let go, “*The Buddhist pandita Shandtideva said, 'If there's something to be done about it, why worry? If there's nothing to be done about it why worry?' If you need to get out there and hustle some contacts – then hustle some contacts. If you've hustled everybody you need to hustle – then you need to chill.*”

jimi izrael, a nationally recognized commentator on NPR and author, is structured and disciplined:

*“Everyday I get up at 6:30 and after taking my son to school I write from 8:00 o'clock to 6 o'clock. I treat everyday like a workday. When I'm done writing, I'm done with work. I don't think it affects my relationships. I don't do twelve-hour marathons unless I have to and I don't have to.”*

When asked how he finds balance, jimi candidly responds, “*I play a lot of X-box and it cleans my mental palate – and then after that I stick my hand down my pants and watch the 'Simpsons.'* It's easy for me. I've been doing it so long switching it on and off.”

Bill Cavanaugh, an audio engineer, has learned to stay calm and notes, *“That’s experience. It’s basically saying I’ve been through this before. Others would probably say the same thing too.”* Alan McElroy says what gets him through, *“You have to have a thick skin, perseverance, determination – a lot of hope – and maintain a level of optimism.”*

Kate Farrell, an executive with WE-tv, has a very healthy routine that keeps her sane:

*I work out, do yoga, and spend time with friends. If you spend a lot of time in dark edit bays it can be draining. The hours are long, you are sitting down, you often work through lunch. Sometimes in the edit room, I do handstands. When I haven’t been able to work out, I just tell the editors to stand by – I’m just doing a handstand. They’re okay. Sometimes they’ll do them with me. It helps if you go out to lunch together – take a walk.*

The important thing for freelancers is to have a generative physical regimen that allows them to recuperate and recharge, while having practices that allow for endurance, flexibility, control, and focus. It is also important to build emotional capacity as emphasized in *The Making of a Corporate Athlete*. Close relationships are the best antidote for maintaining and rekindling positive emotions:

*Anyone who has enjoyed a happy family reunion or an evening with good friends know the profound sense of safety and security that these relationships can induce. Such feelings are closely associated with the Ideal Performance State. Unfortunately, many of the corporate athletes we train believe that in order to perform up to expectations at work, they have no choice but to stint on their time with loved ones. We try to reframe the issue. By devoting more time to their most important relationships and setting clearer boundaries between work and home, we tell our clients, they will not only derive more satisfaction but will also get the recover that they need to perform better at work. (Loehr & Schwartz, 2008, p. 56)*

With two weeks of vacation a year at a typical job, it is extremely difficult in our culture to carve out the time and space needed for recharging emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually. One of the prime reasons that prompted these project participants to engage in freelance work is that it allowed them the time and space to better manage their personal and professional lives while providing time for reflection and relaxation. Although finding work on a regular basis is stressful in our culture, there is no doubt that working in environments where you cannot bring your whole self to work is equally tenuous. These media workers have carved out a work culture balance that allows them to thrive personally and professionally. Although the economy has been tough, they are not daunted and already thinking about their next act.

## The Takeaway: Creativity is Ageless; Requires Generosity of Spirit

### Living What's Next

The creative energy of youth may be a reminder of the inherent enthusiasm for a life filled with wide-open possibility that we all possess. Yet a mature creative individual reminds us that rich, generative moments are possible at any time in life. Youth may feel entitled to the richness and drama of romping in the world; but age allows us to savor, digest, and appreciate the adventure and connectivity of moments that remind us that we are orchestrating a life together. Creativity is everyone's birthright and is not the sole domain of one generation or at the expense of another. We are interdependently connected.

Many of the freelancers involved with *The Migrant Creative* are already moving or thinking about their next project and that is one of the many advantageous of working freelance. They also are able to conjure many of their own projects and bring them to fruition. "*Living the next*" is about the ability to combine possibility with down-to-earth pragmatism that allows them to create interesting work. All of these project participants mix up their personal and professional interests and sometimes combine them as in the case with Carol Beck's documentary involvement with the Emory-Tibet Partnership. A future project Carol has in mind includes going back to Russia:

*I did a project in the Soviet Union 20 years ago, I was the first American in a basically a closed city in Russia. I was teaching at an institute in 1991. So next year is the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I'm thinking about digging all that old footage out and finding many of the people that I interviewed. The Soviet Union – now Russia – has been through tremendous change and upheaval in the last twenty years. It's from a very intimate, personal level.*

The initial theatrical piece that Marc Jaffe, a comedy writer, discussed last year has now mushroomed and expanded its venue to more cities. The play he co-wrote with Eric Coble, *Side Effects May Include*, is now being staged to bring awareness to Parkinson's disease. In conjunction with his wife Karen, their foundation *Shaking With Laughter*, is raising money for Parkinson's disease research (<http://www.shakingwithlaughter.org/>). When he started last year, his first play received standing ovations at each of its sold-out performances and raised over \$20,000. A year later Marc and Karen have raised \$174,602 and their foundation is getting ready to present its 2<sup>nd</sup> annual comedy music gala. In the time it has taken to write this dissertation, Kate Farrell, reality television producer, and Carol Beck, videographer, have both written novels. Kasumi, through her Guggenheim fellowship, is working on finishing a feature-length experimental film *Shockwaves* (<http://www.shockwavesthemovie.com/>). Laura Paglin, a documentary filmmaker, is working on a documentary about the women who survived – but went into the house – of the recently convicted Cleveland serial killer Anthony Sowell. Sheryl White, a commercial copywriter who expressed the desire to retire, is always busy with clients when I call to check in. All of these freelancers are "living what's next."

## **A New Conversation About Being Smarter, Bolder, and Older**

In the past, we have examined segregation as a black or white issue and now it is a conversation that is exploring the many shades of grey. The freelancers described in this project possess great talent and generosity of spirit. The insidious undercurrent of ageism is one that makes them almost apologetic about still working and not preparing for retirement. Yet, these project participants quietly celebrate their age as they bypass the creative markers of where people think they should be at a certain time and just move forward. As a nontraditional doctoral student, do I turn back and say I should have accomplished this task at an earlier date? Hell no, like these freelancers, I reach my milestones and recognize that my nontraditional career trajectory is right on time. As a culture, this kind of intellectual natural resource is too precious to waste – especially when invention is considered the economic savior in today's economy.

The social construction of aging is enjoying a makeover as scientists, neurologists, psychologists, and sociologists explore work/life balance, creativity, and even the concept of retirement. These conversations are slowly changing a culture that extols the virtues of youth and negates the positive aspects of aging or assigns narrower values to where we should be at certain periods of our life. If we continue to devalue aging, then we are also negating the importance of lived experience and the lessons learned. If we give a generous allowance to kids' mishaps by saying they are "young and dumb," then why can't we recognize the wealth of experience vested in being "smarter, bolder and older?"

What we can learn from these freelancers is that an improvisational life does not necessarily need or welcome retirement – but requires relational connectivity, bridging the generational divide, time for rejuvenation, and a little appreciation along the way in order to sufficiently fuel the spirit so people are able to be personally and professionally generative no matter what age marker they've reached. There is no doubt that future creative work teams need to be more expansive, inclusive in order to change the conversation – and spark innovation.

## IX. Conclusion

***“Let’s go back to the freelance thing. Partnerships are so important. The bottom line is that freelance is not an end to itself. It’s where you live. It’s like having a one-bedroom apartment. It doesn’t mean that you sleep alone. It’s still a team sport. You still need company. By nature, we’re social people.”***

***Steven Tatar, Entrepreneur***

# Conclusion

## Reframing The Migrant Creative Experience – From Freelancer To Career Improviser

### What My Research Is About and Why

When I initially started this project three years ago (2009), the U.S. economy was deeply embroiled in a recession and the news from the media work front was more precarious than I remembered before leaving freelance behind and heading into academia (2004). I found the exponentially rapid growth in media freelance a paradoxical but intriguing development given that the participants involved with this dissertation watched their wages being decreased, time required for projects compressed, and the waiting period for checks extended. These media freelancers were the early adopters of a work style that the rest of the population is finally appropriating, thus increasing the competition and consequently reducing the fees. When I started having conversations with the dissertation participants at the height of the recession, I decided to frame their struggle with an appreciative eye for what allowed them to sustain a career from 15 – 30+ years even though they were limping along at the time. This of course was compared to the rest of the country that was battered in the downturn, especially with foreclosures at an all time high.

It is apparent from the rise of the Freelancers Union to the development of many online sites promoting project-oriented work that the freelance phenomenon was and still continues to spread to many other disciplines. I thought it was important to check in to see how these seasoned professionals fared with their career and what we could learn from their experience since media is clearly leading the way in the shift to contract work.

The Migrant Creative is about seeing a new trend of entrepreneurial inventiveness added to the freelance mix and this is reflective of where the new work is heading. These participants find themselves combining a variety of workstyles (freelance, full-time, and part-time) and often at the same time – while also working on their own self-initiated projects. There is no allegiance to any standalone style. These seasoned freelancers are elevating their status from “worker bee” to being dexterous, freestyle career improvisers.

### The Research Process

Initially, I had conversations with eleven freelancers, all over the age of 35, many I have worked with or knew personally and was familiar with their work across many multimedia domains – cultural critic and journalist; videographer; audio recording engineer; network executive producer; experimental media artist; screenwriter; comedy writer, entrepreneur, and philanthropist; filmmaker; writer, radio host, and blogger; designer, creative director, and entrepreneur; and copywriter. They are all individually highlighted in the *Appreciative Reflections*.



During the summer of 2010, I met with the participants and we discussed freelance work, challenges, rewards, adaptations, and visions for the future regarding their projects and sustainability (see *Introduction* and *Methodology*).

I designed an analytical lens *Appreciative Reflections*, adapted from appreciative inquiry, to construct the freelance journey of the eleven participants. Through the *Appreciative Reflections*, I chronicled critical life lessons in their individual life narratives that were approved by the participants.

The central question explores, “What is the lived experience of a media freelancer at the border of a changing work culture? In the four chapters that comprise the macro narratives, I collectively examined freelance issues facing the participants: “*The Liminal Freelance Landscape: Geography, Proximity and Community*”; “*This is a Real Job*”; “*A Conversation About Negotiation, Reputation, and Sustainability*”; and “*The Generative Years: Living What’s Next.*” These multi-voiced reflections and chapters shaped, challenged, and even changed my idea regarding freelance and the new work world emerging in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **A Surprising Shift in my Thinking**

Initially, I viewed the freelance experience through a somewhat skewed lens because I went through the dot.com bubble burst and then decided to enter the tamer world of academia even before the recession. When I initially used the expression “migrant creative,” I used it cynically, half-jokingly to describe the precarity of the freelance experience and raising a child as a single mom. This expression conjured images of itinerate media workers toiling long hours, picking up gigs, and scavenging for creative piecework in the field. Remarkably, I changed in the process and saw something vital and generative in the migrant creative experience of these participants because the rewards for them were more than monetary. Surprisingly, it was their expertise, extensive portfolios, reputation, and age that allowed them to improvise on the front line of a shifting work force and hang tough when others were not quite as fortunate. As Bill Cavanaugh would say, “*You have to be able to function as if you are on the frontier again. There’s no backup.*”

Risktaking and innovation rises during times of hardship (Bava, personal communication, 2012). When a migrant or immigrant enters a new culture, they carry with them hopes, dreams, and a strong work ethic along with over-the-horizon radar and the tenacity to survive. These freelancers have the confidence to enter new work territories without preconceived ideas, expectations or outcomes. They have learned the value of hard work and are not afraid to create opportunity, but they are equally adept at pivoting and realizing that projects do not have to manifest in the way they originally intended. An example would be Marc Jaffe, the comedy writer, who co-founded the *Shaking With Laughter* foundation with his wife in order to raise funds for Parkinson’s research. As a career improviser, he is pleasantly surprised to find his creative outreach positively impacting community. In addition, Marc continues to showcase his play across the country, *Side Effects May Include*, promoting his game show, *Bonk*, and merchandising his inventive wine-disappearing Passover Seder cup *Elijah Drinks*.

For many involved with this dissertation, their projects represent a diverse venue and a fearless capacity to venture into new domains while employing a wide range of media-related skills. Kate, a longtime sports producer for *Olympics* and the *Super Bowl*, is now a full-time executive reality television producer for WE-tv. Outside of work, Kate delves into her own freelance writing and producing projects. Steven Tatar, a designer, Internet developer and brander, now focuses on bringing his entrepreneurial vision of developing his knitwear company *Ohio Knitting Mills* – while simultaneously also working on a wide variety of projects that are not all media related. These dissertation participants represent the new career improvisers who are expanding the parameters of freelance, moving beyond people coming to them with a specific assignment, to a more entrepreneurial experience by introducing their own project creation into the mix or by combining a variety of work styles.

Afterwards, I discovered not only an appreciation for my own freelance work ethic but also for those involved with this project. It was my own deficit thinking that failed to see the professionalism required to develop and deliver well thought out creative projects. These nagging “social ghosts” from the past still haunt and convince us that this type of work is less than. This idea is explored in the chapter *This is a Real Job*.

These participants showcase the new style of creative who freely enters multiple work configurations of contract, salaried, freelance, full-time, part-time while also tending to their own entrepreneurial ventures – and often at the same time. This is not only redefining freelance but also changing the definition of what incorporates a “real job.”

## **What I Have Learned From These Migrant Creatives**

### **Freelance Has Permanently Expanded The Definition of a “Real Job”**

For years, the idea of a full-time position with benefits was considered the benchmark for what constitutes a “real job.” As one-third of the workforce and growing now enters the ranks of freelance employment, the definition of what constitutes a “real job” is expanding and this is explored in the chapter *“This is a Real Job.”* These freelancers attest to the “realness” of their work as they negotiate contracts, create projects, critically evaluate and design media, determine their worth, forge new relationships, and decide where to focus their energy. The definition of a “real job” is undergoing rapid social change in a fashion comparable to how the notion of a “regular family” has been irrevocably altered. In the chapter, I explore how a “real job” is a construct that we have socially made up to imply a 9-5 job with a sense of permanency or security based on performance.

### **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Workforce Is Shifting From Independent to Interdependent**

The terms “real job” and “independent” worker are clearly being redefined at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to reflect an “interdependent” reality that incorporates a more mobile, transient workforce and the freelancer is on the frontline of this change. The migrant creative experience is one of adaptation, improvisation, and a recognizing that we are all connected. That is a huge shift in thinking from the competitive diatribe of “every man for himself” or “it’s a dog eat dog world” philosophy that dominated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Because of our connectivity with the Internet, from the participants' narratives one can glean that a creative migrant is one who can forge more interdependent alliances and relationships, which are at the core of their continued success.

Whether freelancers are working in the neighborhood or overseas, positions are always secured through recommendations of people who are aware of their performance capabilities. As Carol Beck, an international videographer comments, *"I have friends who have a small production company in town who do a lot of international work too. I'll say I'm going to Amsterdam. Do you know anybody there to hook me up? They'll shoot me the name of somebody. With people you know and trust, you share resources."*

### **The New Loyalty Gravitates Toward People Not Companies**

At this point in time, it is impossible to go it alone. With freelance, the workforce is moving toward greater improvisation and collaboration because of the Internet. The strength of companies has not gone away, yet this feeling of corporate dependency has diminished because we are also "linked in" to our network of friends and creative cohorts no matter where we travel. Even if you start a new position with a company, the balance of power is not nearly as lopsided since they recognize that your personal connections and online identity can serve as a powerful professional resource. Now more than ever, the importance of our relationships is not only synergistic but also central in this social media environment where your reputation or online presence is just a click away.

The companies that consistently make the list of great places to work are one's that focus on developing camaraderie among its workers and this in turn strengthens their brand (e.g. Google). The shift in thinking is that it is the people that make great companies work.

### **Relationships Are Not Enough – Your Reputation Must Be Solid**

Freelance was already a relationally connected business and that has not changed. However, connections are not standalone because without talent, integrity, and the reputation to deliver what you promised – you cannot survive. Your word and reputation are everything in this business and friendships are not enough. Although that sounds like a commonsense approach, I find many students inflating the importance of their connections. In freelance, connections mean absolutely nothing if you cannot be trusted to deliver a superior creative product or service early or at least on time. These relationships built on trust do not happen overnight. It demands a track record of delivering again and again. This is another reason why the seasoned veterans have survived this recession because they are able to keep their word and in an edgy economy companies cannot afford to take a chance with someone new.

### **The Ongoing Conversation Drives The Negotiation**

Many inexperienced freelancers assume that the conversation is strictly about negotiating a price but that is not the entire story. The mark of a good freelancer is that they are engaged in conversation and communicating with a client throughout the process. It is this ongoing conversation that can make the difference between just doing your job to being invited back. I introduce the notion of *negotiation as an ongoing conversation*. There are

seven vital elements examined in the chapter *A Conversation About Negotiation, Reputation, and Sustainability*: interest, conversational trinity (hearing, listening, and speaking), discovery, mutual coordination, appreciative capacity, educating the client, deciphering the unspoken rate card, and renegotiation. The importance of learning how a conversation requires not only speaking but also active “listening and hearing” has reframed my perspective.

## **Creativity Values Authenticity**

There is no place that provides the high ground when it comes to creativity. Sparks of innovation are happening everywhere and it was especially gratifying to see places like Cleveland, Detroit, and Pittsburgh and other hardscrabble “Rust Belt” cities making a comeback because they present fertile ground for new imaginative possibilities. The book *“Rust Belt Chic: The Cleveland Anthology”* captures the appeal of why creative folks decide to call Cleveland home, “In a world of ever-growing ephemerality and superficiality, our authenticity is an asset” (Pilparinen & Trubek, 2012).

These cities are coming to life because they are not apologizing for what they aren’t rather they are embracing the process of becoming and actively creating who they are. It is the same with all the project participants. They are reveling in an appreciative moment – an acknowledgement of what is working. “This comes from the activity of being a creator – life and work is an improvisational performance. All of these participants are actively creating what comes next” (Bava, personal communication, 2012). The freelancers involved with this project have years of experience that evoke confidence without pretense. As seasoned freelancers, they are embracing what is working and saying this is who we are. This acceptance, reframing in a more appreciative way to accept what is working, is exactly what we need to spark the flames of imagination whether you are a city or a person.

What I discovered with this group of participants is that creative folks seek opportunity wherever they land. Media freelancers were the early adopters of a work style that recognized the importance of relational connections and collaboration as vital to their survival. When we move away from deficit discourse (Gergen, 1994) a negative verbalization of what is not working, toward appreciation and acceptance, it opens the doors to more possibilities.

## **The Implications of This Research**

### **We Are All Freelancers**

Fast-forward to 2012 and the freelance experience in all professions has skyrocketed. As dissertation participant and comedy writer Marc Jaffe notes, “*everyone is a freelancer now – they just don’t know it.*” Whether you have a full-time, part-time or freelance job, the guarantee for how long you will be working at a specific position can be questionable given the current economic climate. “We are all freelancers” becomes an existential metaphor

for recognizing the increasingly rapid instability in the workforce, while giving a nod to our mortality.

The “migrant creative” experience is presently affecting one out of three workers according to the Freelancers Union ([www.freelancersunion.org](http://www.freelancersunion.org)) and continues to grow. By 2020, research suggests that one-half of the population will be working on a contract basis (see *Introduction*).

The educational realm has not yet caught up with the reality of more jobs switching to contract positions. The colleges are preparing students for jobs that are rapidly changing and it is important to suggest to students that they may have to create their own, as advocated by many entrepreneurial programs. It was at the insistence of my former academic coworkers, both production freelancers, that I hurry up and finish this project because these real-life lessons and stories paint a clear portrait of media work. These stories are not prescriptive, but provide life lessons honed from years of experience, that give students and a transitional workforce something to consider when starting to explore career possibilities.

### **These Freelancers Are The New Role Models For Creativity and Aging**

The media freelancers involved with this project are reshaping the age and creativity boundaries especially in a youth-fixated industry. These participants are becoming new role models – modeling the value of experience with age – as they refuse to retire, keep working on creative projects, bridge the generational divide, maintain a self-care regimen, and as participant Laura Paglin suggests, *“have the courage to try something ridiculous.”*

### **Developing An Appreciative Focus; Changing the Dynamic from Me to We**

All the freelancers are constantly hustling – searching for work, completing the project or assignment, and then they are ready to go again. The new work challenge will be how to find peace in a forever shifting and mutable workplace.

As an entrepreneur you are on the line, as a freelancer you never rest, and as an employee you are vulnerable. The way to ease the “going it alone” burden placed on the creative worker’s shoulders is to shift the orientation from a “me” to a “we.” Sustainability invites rethinking work style possibilities and embracing an improvisational style that invites cooperation with others and this is where it is possible to create something new together. This dance starts with a conversation. However, It is not just about conversing at the start of negotiations but throughout the collaborative process and this is discussed at length in the chapter, *A Conversation About Negotiation, Reputation, and Sustainability*. The freelancer now shifts the position from taking the lead to one that allows both parties to have improvised solo and supporting roles. This appreciative recognition of the “other,” has the potential to create a kinder and more forgiving workplace whatever workstyle you embrace.

## What I Would Have Done Differently?

Although pleased with the results, I was inhibited by the length of time required to transcribe the conversations for all eleven participants. However, the benefit was an immersion in the first-level of coding when I indexed each transcript. In retrospect, it worked out.

## Creative Approaches That Worked

Intuitively, the micro narratives, *Appreciative Reflections*, were an interesting layering device that introduces the reader to the participants in an engaging interactive fashion and this brings the approved work stories to life. The pre-approved bios, transcripts and reflections allowed for a confident and fair representation of the participants' voices in the macro narratives – the chapters. Although it took more time, I honored the collaborative process with the participants who were so generous with their time and energy. This in turn allowed them to attach their names to the project and they provided the real-life personalization that is often absent in the story of freelancers' lives.

## The Conversation: To Be Continued

These conversations with seasoned media freelancers have barely scratched the surface and beg to be continued. As a greater number of workers are shifting to freelance, I would like to reframe the discussion with a more appreciative focus on what is working? What practices would help to make their work more sustainable?

Media freelancers were the early forerunners in embodying the practice that creativity demands the fuel of new ideas, a healthy regimen, and sufficient rest. They intuitively understand that this is an industry that takes a high energetic toll and the majority of freelancers involved with this project know how to find balance. We can learn a lot from freelancers about practices they utilize to sustain vitality, creativity, and health. The idea of creativity as a process that requires energy is also relevant given an aging population. Although I touched on the importance of media freelancers reshaping the age and creativity boundaries, I would like to continue the discussion when it comes to intergenerational work teams. This is critical not only in the creative industries but in all businesses where diversity and continuous learning is considered important.

Carol Beck, a Buddhist, brings her spiritual practice to the work experience and I thought that this would be another topic to examine further. What are the overarching philosophies or beliefs that allow the freelancer to deal with the uncertainty? This discussion would open the doors to a relatively unexplored area.

In conclusion, this research brings an appreciative gaze to the liminal lives of media freelancers and constructs them as career improvisers. These participants showcase a career dexterity that extends the parameters of freelance, moving beyond contracted

assignments, to a more entrepreneurial experience by introducing their own project creation into the mix and combining a variety of workstyles – often at the same time.

The migrant creative experience is one of adaption, improvisation, and recognizing that we are all connected. The 21<sup>st</sup> century reflects a shift from an “independent” to “interdependent” mobile reality. The new loyalty is to people not companies. This story of sustainability is one that understands that we are relationally situated in our journey – from finding a new project to ongoing negotiations and moving to the next project in the cycle. Here the creative improviser develops an appreciative focus, one that invites in the “other,” for this change has the capacity to not only jumpstart creativity but also catalyze a more generative work environment. This high-level collaboration, one that welcomes change and divergent thinking, demands conversational engagement throughout the process. The story of these personal journeys speak of creativity as an authentic, interdependent process that breaks the age barrier and remains responsive to the dynamic face of the shifting media world. These migrant creatives are singlehandedly changing the construction of what encompasses a “real job,” and represent the face of the new work frontier.

# Appendix



# Research Participation Consent Form

Prepared for: Taos Institute/Tilburg University Ph.D. Program

Prepared by: Laine Goldman

June 2010

## Research Participation Consent Form (for interview participants over the age of 18)

Greetings. My name is Elaine (Laine) Goldman and I am a doctoral candidate and researcher with the Taos Institute/Tilburg University program in the Netherlands. I am the researcher for a project entitled ***The Migrant Creative: U.S. Media Freelancers at the Border of a Changing Work Culture*** (working title) a dissertation exploring the world of the media freelancer.

The Taos/Tilburg doctoral program, applying Social Constructionist theory and Appreciative Inquiry practices, examines how dialogue positively transforms individual, organizational and collective realities to create meaning. These collaborative inquiry practices are incorporated in the research process. As a participant, you are invited to be part of the conversation. This performance research methodology of mutual discovery is intended to benefit both the investigator and participant.

In our hectic lives, we often do not get to reflect on our relationship with work. We are here to jointly study the topic and share thoughts on our freelance experiences. Before our first interview, we will briefly discuss a critical issue that concerns you as a media freelancer and/or someone associated with contract workers. Relevant questions pertinent to your area of interest will be developed for the first conversation and sent via email. The interview, anywhere from 1½ to 2 hours, will be conducted in person. The conversation will be personalized and varied in an effort to gather multiple perspectives. If a follow-up call is needed to clarify or expand a topic, the conversation (via Skype or phone) will be arranged with your permission and prior consent.

Throughout this project, and with your permission, I will discreetly make an audio recording of some of our conversations in order to have a record of our discussion. The recordings will be considered part of data for this project. At any time during our conversation, you can ask to turn off the audio recording by saying this is "off the record." Your name will appear in my dissertation with your permission, but if prefer we can create a fictitious name for you to protect your identity. As part of protocol, I will ask you again at the end of our interview if you would like to use your real name or a fictitious name. I will work with you beforehand to ensure that how you are credited in the dissertation is totally acceptable. Should you decide to leave at any time your interview and recordings will be destroyed to fully safeguard your privacy.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary and you may disengage at any time. I will publish the results of the study. Any of the quotes or statements that I use will be credited to you. You may also review the conversation transcriptions to verify the information and make any changes.

This research study, *The Migrant Creative*, will be of significant value in helping to understand the culture of the media freelancer and the societal implications of contract work. If you have any questions about this research, you can call or email me (see footer). You may also contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. Saliha Bava ([private email removed](#)) – a faculty member at the Taos Institute/Tilburg University doctoral program ([www.taosinstitute.net](http://www.taosinstitute.net)). Thank you for your cooperation and consideration. I will give you a copy of this form to take with you. I appreciate your contribution to this project and look forward to our discussion (s). If you agree to participate in this research project, please circle the following statements and sign the research participation consent form:

– continued –

I am over 18 and eligible to participate in this interview (circle one):

YES NO

I agree to be interviewed for this project (circle one):

YES NO

I agree to be audiotaped during this interview (circle one): YES NO  
(At any time during the interview, we can turn off the recording if you say "off the record")

I agree to let the Researcher (Laine Goldman) use the interviews and research for this YES NO  
dissertation and subsequent professional publication/presentation projects (circle one)

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PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE	DATE	INVESTIGATOR'S SIGNATURE	DATE
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PARTICIPANT'S NAME PRINTED	DATE	INVESTIGATOR'S NAME PRINTED	DATE
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(PRIMARY RESEARCHER'S SIGNATURE – ELAINE (LAINE) GOLDMAN	DATE
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